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# Redon

Cyclops

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**FEDERICO ZERI** (Rome, 1921-1998), eminent art historian and critic, was vice-president of the National Council for Cultural and Environmental Treasures from 1993. Member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris, he was decorated with the Legion of Honor by the French government. Author of numerous artistic and literary publications; among the most well-known: *Pittura e controriforma*, the Catalogue of Italian Painters in the Metropolitan Museum of New York and the Walters Gallery of Baltimora, and the book *Confesso che ho sbagliato*.

## Work edited by FEDERICO ZERI

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FEDERICO ZERI and MARCO DOLCETTA

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# REDON

# CYCLOPS

"For my part, I believe I have made an expressive, suggestive, undefined art." Thus did Redon describe his painting: an art that moves back and forth between a natural and an imaginary world, juxtaposing impossible

elements with possible ones, following a strict visual logic. The CYCLOPS represents a fundamental milestone in his search for a figurative language able to evoke the deep mysteries of the spirit by giving voice to the imaginary and to dreams.

# REDON'S UNIVERSE OF DREAMS

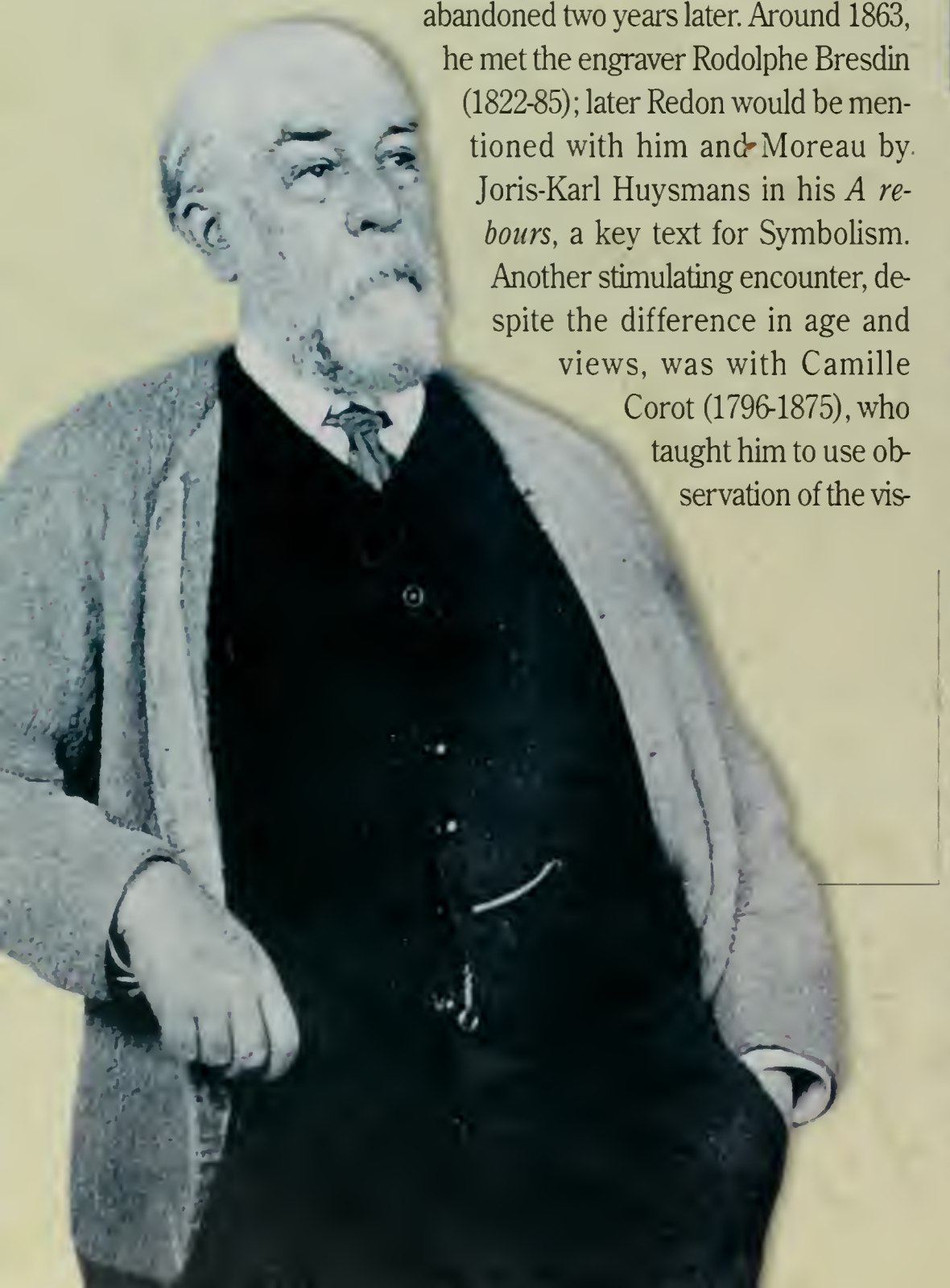
## CYCLOPS

*1895-1900*

● Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum (oil on panel, 64x51 cm)

● Born in 1840 in Bordeaux, Odilon Redon spent his childhood on the family property at Peyrelebade, in the Médoc, revealing a solitary nature. At the age of fifteen he was sent to his first teacher, the watercolorist Stanislas Gorin (active between 1846 and 1861), a modest artist but a good teacher. At the annual exhibitions of the *Société des Amis des Arts*, the young painter came into contact with the works of the great artists of his generation, from Delacroix to Millet, from Corot to Gustave Moreau (1826-98), who was just starting out. In 1859 Redon entered the *atelier* of the academic painter Léon Gérôme (1824-1904), which he abandoned two years later. Around 1863, he met the engraver Rodolphe Bresdin (1822-85); later Redon would be mentioned with him and Moreau by Joris-Karl Huysmans in his *A rebours*, a key text for Symbolism. Another stimulating encounter, despite the difference in age and views, was with Camille Corot (1796-1875), who taught him to use observation of the visible world as his starting point. Finally, Redon learned from the theories of Charles Darwin and his botanist friend Armand Clavaud the practice of scientific observation and the discovery of the microscope. In 1902 the artist started working with color; until 1900 his production was for the most part in black and white.

• EGG
(1885, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale). Under the guidance of Bresdin, who favored fantastic, visionary themes, Redon was introduced to engraving, the mysterious aspects of reality, and the role of the imagination. This lithograph belongs to the series *Hommage à Goya*, which fascinated Mallarmé; he wrote to Redon: "I have never seen a drawing able to transmit so much intellectual fear and frightening attractiveness."



• BERTRAND-JEAN REDON
(1840-1916). The artist, shown here in a photo made around 1910, is known as Odilon, a nickname deriving from his mother's name Marie-Odile. After his father's death, he settled in Paris and married Camille Falte, with whom he had two children. His economic condition was not healthy: at the age of 58 he wrote to his mother: "I possess absolutely nothing. Just a few francs."

● "I created an art according to my own way of thinking," wrote Redon in the preface to his intimate diary, *A soi même*, where he noted his observations from 1867 to 1915. And later on: "I think I meekly gave in to the secret laws which led me to shape, neither well nor badly, as I was able and following my dream, things in which I have put all of myself." For Redon, dream is the personal reality that the painter must express and that presents itself in a confused manner only because it has not yet been explored. This is not the commonplace idea of dreams as bizarre escape world, but of territories of the psyche which the artist traverses in an attempt to open them up to the logic of the visible. Thus, for Redon the *Cyclops* is the monstrous and terrifying monster which bears down on human destiny, but cannot be fought because it is an integral part of his own nature.

# AN ART SPRINGING FROM THE UNCONSCIOUS

"Nothing in art can be done by will alone: everything is done by docile submission to the coming of the unconscious," wrote Redon, for whom fantasy and dream provide the occasion to investigate the most intimate and secret regions of our being. The figure of the Cyclops which, with an ingenuous, loving air, emerges from the shadows to gaze on the sleeping nymph, could be a materialization of the girl's dreams. Some scholars think he could represent the artist himself, an attentive and silent observer.

● The painting, which Redon called *Polype*, recalls the figure of Polyphemus, the Cyclops who was Ulysses's enemy and, after the Homeric poems, became the hero of a love story with the Nereid Galatea; she is the sleeping nymph, described in Theocritus's *Idylls* as Polyphemus's faithful lover, producer of milk and protector of flocks. In the most widespread version of the myth of Galatea, derived from Ovid and Apollodorus, Polyphemus's love for her is unrequited, and for this reason the Cyclops kills Acis, her young lover; but the figure in Redon's picture appears benevolent, as he timidly and discreetly watches over Galatea's sleep.

◆ CYCLOPS (n.d., New York, private collection). This charcoal drawing depicts a monstrous head with the eye turned upwards. From the symbolic point of view, the large eye shown as a sphere represents intellectual perception.

● "Suggestive art," said Redon, "is the radiation of divine plastic elements, brought together and combined to provoke dream which it illuminates and exalts, inciting one to thought." As the art historian Ester Coen comments, "Redon's world seems to borrow from Goya those effects of fear born out of dramatic political situations," but in Redon the deadly fancies become "innocuous mirages and melancholic illusions of the absolute."

• VISION
(1881, Baltimore, Baltimore Museum of Art).
Redon often treated the theme of the eye in his works.
In 1882, in the series *To Edgar Poe*, it appeared hanging in the air like a balloon; in 1883 it reappeared in the series *Les Origenes*, still looking up, but in the center of a Cyclops's forehead.

• THE LIVING EYE
Redon revealed in his writings a profound knowedge of the relationship between dreams and the unconscious. The eye looking upwards, according to Michael Gibson, represents the superego, momentarily distracted from its task as censor and inhibitor. Others think, instead, that it is the observer, a witness to the external reality of the world or perhaps, as Groom maintains in the catalogue of the Chicago exhibition in 1994, an allusion to the eye of the artist involved in the search for knowledge and desire.

# THE SECRETS OF MATERIALS

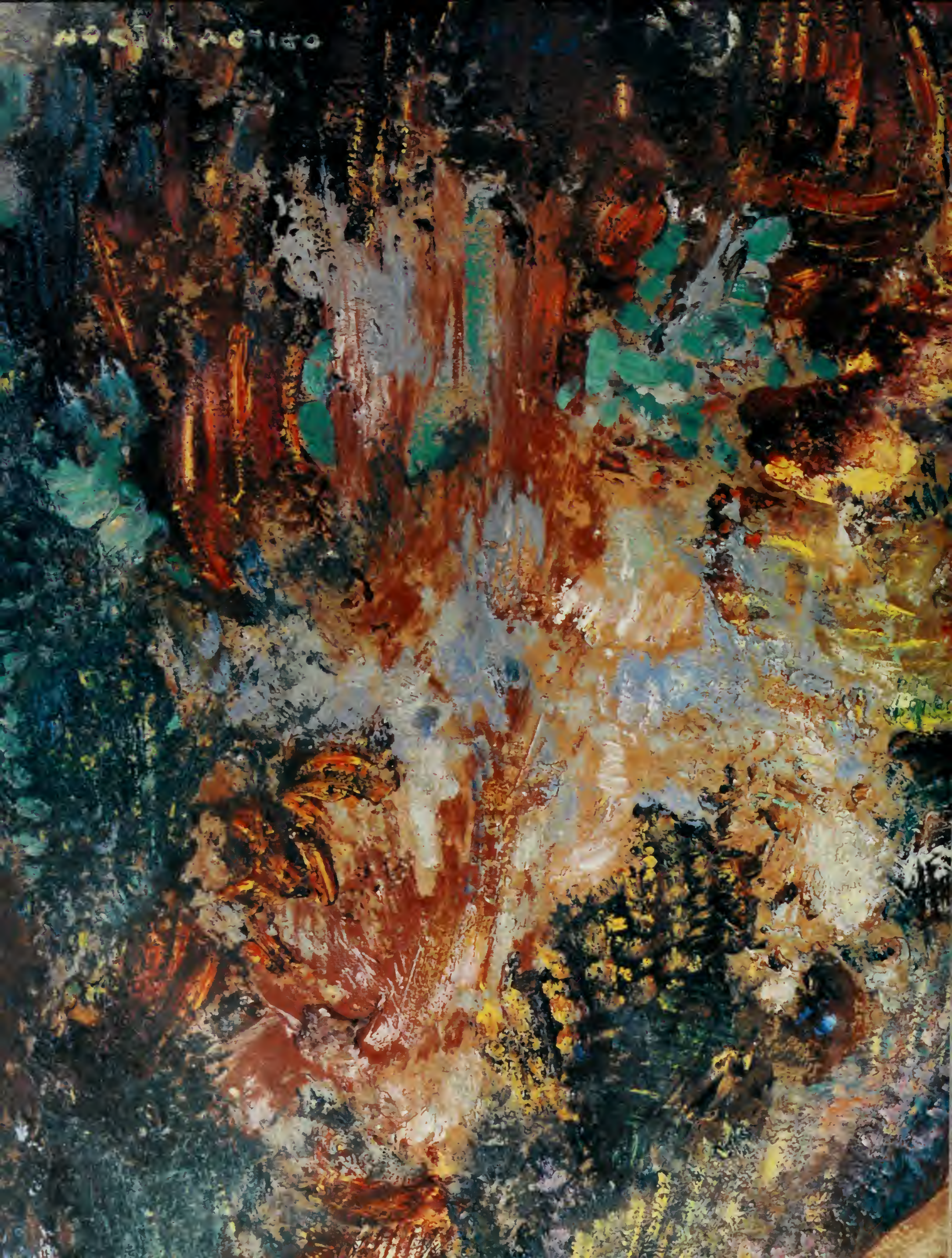
"Besides the conditioning received from the influence of the people and the place surrounding him, the artist yields, to some degree, to the demanding powers of the materials he uses," Redon states in a lecture in Holland in 1913. The painter often emphasized the material nature of his work, and his habit, which he himself revealed, of painting after he had been gardening, taking up the charcoal with his still-dirty hand so that the two dusts could mingle, can be seen as a manifestation of this tendency to merge with his material. In this sense, the art historian Marisa Volpi observes that "the material conditions in which the inner experience occurs are thus also the tools of plastic language: here lies the extraordinary modernity of Redon, contemporary in this to artists like Klee, Arp, Burri, Dubuffet." In the *Cyclops*, Redon uses a dense, material pigment, especially to render the rocks and ground in the bottom half of the picture.

◆ PRECIOUS IMPASTO
Redon renders the teeming appearance of nature using a painting technique which owes a great deal to the practice of the Impressionists, especially in his ability to juxtapose colors. But, as opposed to the Impressionists who used pure colors, Redon mixed his paints, obtaining a precious chromatic effect thanks to the masterful juxtaposition and blending of the tones.

● The *Cyclops* is a work of transition, which demonstrates his passage from a painting tied to the disquieting aspect, the monstrous, the nightmares, typical of his *Noirs* – as Redon named the group of drawings and lithographs which dominated his activity until the 1890s – to a new conception, in which the artist is taken with light and color. While the old philosophy of the Noirs is expressed by the monstrous, looming figure of the Cyclops emerging from the violet shadows, this second phase is manifested by the soft figure of Galatea surrounded by delicately colored flowers.

◆ THE STRUCTURE OF THE WORK
Dominating this composition is the giant, with his monstrous face containing the large, diquieting eye, its gaze embracing the nymph's body like a projection of his desire. The panel simulates a flat surface with a vertical axis, with no suggestion of depth of field. The Cyclops, by virtue of his size and sharply outlined shape, seems to be on the same plane as the girl.

● The entire painting is a true triumph of color: from the pale blue of the sky veiled by clouds to the pinkish flesh tones of the giant and the galaxy of colors in the flowers surrounding the nymph. Here Redon displays all his skill in transforming oil paints into a precious chromatic material, with a mastery in juxtaposing and blending tones than can only derive from his knowledge and familiarity with the Impressionist painters of his same generation, like Claude Monet (1840-1926), Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919), and Alfred Sisley (1839-99).



# THE NOCTURNAL REALM OF THE IMAGES

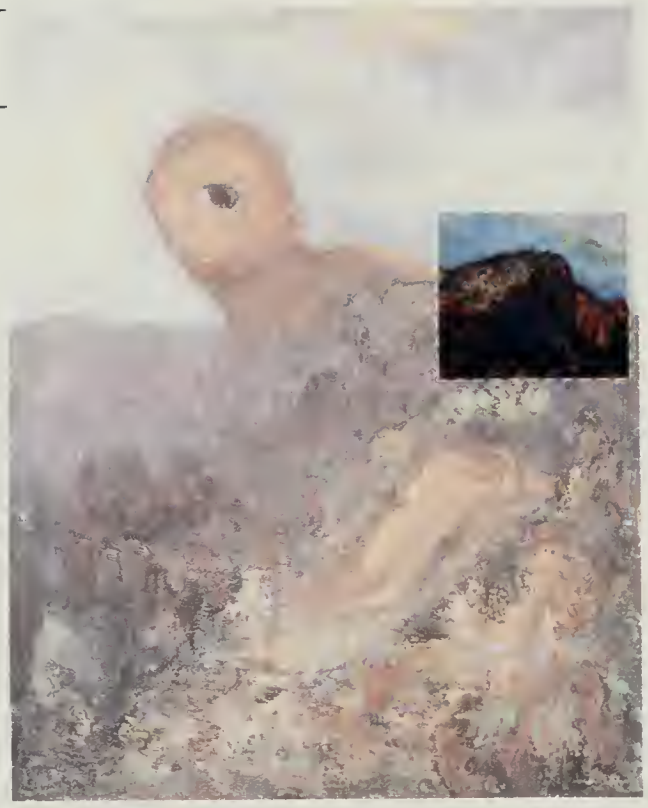
"Thinkers love shadow, they walk in it, they play in it, as though their brains found their proper element there... Man will always be there, in time, while it lasts, and everything that belongs to the light cannot be put aside." Thus does Redon manifest his adherence to the so-called "nocturnal realm of the images," or – as the scholar Marisa Volpi observes – to "all those forms of collective and individual imagination in which life and death, good and evil, content and form are symbolized and experienced as clearly and structurally opposed." In the *Cyclops* in particular, the vast zone of violet shadows is where Polyphemus emerges: his silhouette stands out clearly against the mist and haze of a sky covered with milky clouds as he rises to cast his gaze onto the young girl, whose body is enveloped and as though held down by the earth, the sand, the rocks studded with plants, stones, and larval creatures.

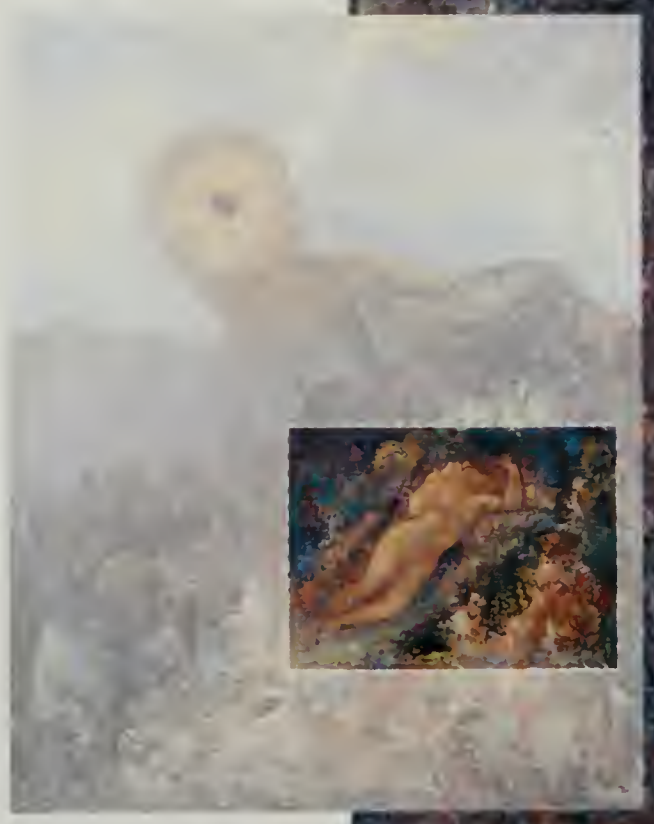
● The sleeping nymph is reduced almost to a simplified organic shape. From the formal point of view, Redon's female images are much less original than his monsters, into whom he pours all his inventiveness. Galatea prefigures a series of images – from Pandora to Angelica – all treated in the same way: a soft, pastel-colored female body wrapped in a precious pigment rich in effects of light and shimmering color, as in the *Birth of Venus* (1912), where the goddess is embraced by the shell. Redon's female nudes are floating forms with all the evanescence of a vision: for Redon woman is an integral part of the natural order, an organic form more than an autonomous being.

● A trait common to all the Symbolist movement is that of presenting a world "other" than daily reality with the greatest degree of tangibility and three-dimensionality. Within this common program, the works and poetics of the various artists naturally differ: for example, the derivation of Redon's *Cyclops* from Gustave Moreau's *Galatea* of 1880 has been noted, and in effect many similar elements can be seen in the iconography and symbolic language, but Redon's style is totally different from that of his older teacher. The gelid sharpness of the colors, the cold, metallic, carefully chiseled forms of Moreau's painting yield in Redon to a material handling of the pigment and a "vanishing" treatment of vast zones left unfinished. These are variations in taste which are reflected also in the ideal of beauty. Moreau's ideal of beauty is demoniac, satanic, while Redon – and in this he is closer to the English pre-Raphaelites, who display an angelic, somewhat stereotyped vision of woman – sees in feminine beauty, as did the Romantics, the mirror of the harmony of nature.

◆ THE BIRTH OF VENUS (c. 1912, Paris, Musée du Petit Palais). In this pastel, Redon sings his hymn to female beauty and the harmony of nature with chromatic chords ranging from pink to mother-of-pearl to violet, in a rosy light that envelops the woman's delicate form. On the facing page, at the top, *The Birth of Venus* (1912, private collection).

◆ THE GIANT'S HAND
Camouflaged among the rocks, the Cyclops's four chubby fingers can barely be distinguished. The position of the hand, so natural it almost arouses tenderness, helps the giant maintain his privileged observation point and at the same time hide his enormous body behind the rocky outcropping, ready to duck back into the shadows at the right moment. The delicate, affected gesture of the slightly lifted little finger contrasts with the roughness of the hand and contributes to the sentimental humanization of the Cyclops. This fantastic representation responds to Redon's precise desire to represent the impossible according to the laws of the possible; and for this reason his monsters and fantastic creatures, more than being deadly nightmares, are melancholic visions, romantic mirages of the infinite. The detail of the hand also shows some strokes of blue on top of the flesh tones; in the same manner as the Impressionist painters, Redon renders on canvas the material quality of light and creates an interaction between the figure and the surrounding atmosphere.







◆ THE SLEEPING NYMPH

The slender figure of the sleeping nymph seems intimately linked with the ground on which she lies, that is, with the vegetable and mineral world which manifests itself around her as patches and explosions of pulverized colors, evanescent or indistinct, offered as pure visual sensations. Below: Gustave Moreau, *Galatea* (1880, Paris, private collection). Compared to Redon's invention, Moreau sticks to the canons of a traditional representation.

# THE PAINTER BORN ON A SOUND WAVE

Of a reserved and private nature: thus was Redon described by the publisher Thadée Natanson (1868-1904) in his memories of painters entitled *Peints à leur tour* ("painted in their turn"), published in 1948. In a letter to Bresdin, who for him embodied the model of a free man, Redon described his inability to choose between "white collar" and "smock" – that is to say, between a middle-class existence and the "laborious condition" of the artist – opposing social achievement to the artistic calling. But Redon would maintain for a long time an undefined and non-productive position with regard to this latter, alternating between painting, music, and literature.

● In a letter to the Belgian writer and jurist Edmond Picard (1836-1924), Redon traced his self-portrait, stating that he was born on a sound wave. According to Natanson, he had a "musical voice," adored music, and practiced it as an amateur. He would often perform at the Saturday evening salon of Madame de Rayssac, on the Rue des Beaux-Arts, where he played the violin, accompanied by Ernest Chausson (1855-99)

on the piano. Music was, in short, a basic component of his life, and his metaphorical, imaginary, expressive art, as he himself defined it more than once, aimed at being a musical art.

● His bond with Bresdin, a brooding, unconventional character, is symptomatic of the condition of marginality and isolation that marks Redon's youth and is the sign of the artist's profound alienation from the dominant culture and social models of his time. Bresdin also passed on to him his passion for the works of Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) and Rembrandt.

● Undoubtedly the most stimulating encounter the artist had, despite the difference in age and the distance between their concepts of art, was with the older Camille Corot. The elderly master's investigation of black attracted and fascinated him, and Redon painted in his early period *sur le motif* some small landscapes of the Breton coast or of Peyrelebade. "Alongside an uncertainty, always place a certainty," was the advice of "Papa Corot" – as the younger artists called him – and Redon did not fail to take it to heart. This maxim provided the guiding thread for his development, translated in practice into the juxtaposition of the "finished," hard, metallic and precious, in the style of Bresdin or Moreau, to the "unfinished," vague, fading, more closely tied to the natural given derived from the older painter, vibrant as that of the Impressionists.

◆ PIERRE PUVIS DE CHAVANNES *Maidens beside the Sea* (1894, Paris, Musée d'Orsay). Puvis de Chavannes (1824-98) exercised a strong influence on the burgeoning Symbolist movement. Like Moreau, he is as far away from the Naturalists as he is from the Impressionists, offering a radical alternative to both. In the oval, *Self-Portrait* of Odilon Redon (c. 1880, Paris, Musée d'Orsay, detail).

◆ CAMILLE COROT
*Gust of Wind*
(1854-67, Reims, Musée des Beaux-Arts). The intimate emotional bond with the environment, manifested in every work by the artist and present also here, is one of Corot's artistic traits which most attracted Redon. The extraordinary event in nature here is the devastating power of the wind, that blows the trees about and sweeps through the scene, which is crossed by a fragile little figure. The dramatic force of the work is rendered with a refined range of dark greens, painted tone on tone against a sky dominated by grays.

◆ LANDSCAPE AT PEYRELEBADE
(1880, Paris, Musée d'Orsay). Peyrelebade, the sad, charming place of his childhood, to which Redon regularly returned until 1897, when the property was sold, provided the stimulus for various life compositions made in his youth. These works, which he called "sketches for the author" (*Ebauches pour l'auteur*), while maintaining a traditional layout and an interpretation of the light close to Corot, already reveal a new ferment in the pigment, which would be typical of his mature works.

# THE POWER OF SHADOW

Predominant in Redon's early production was drawing and the use of charcoal, a little known technique which was hardly used at the time. In his choice of black, the artist reaffirmed the intellectual value traditionally attributed to drawing, in contrast with the sensuality of color: "One must respect black, nothing can corrupt it; it is not pleasing to the eye, and it does not awaken any sensuality. It is an instrument of the intellect, much more than the beautiful color of the palette or prism."

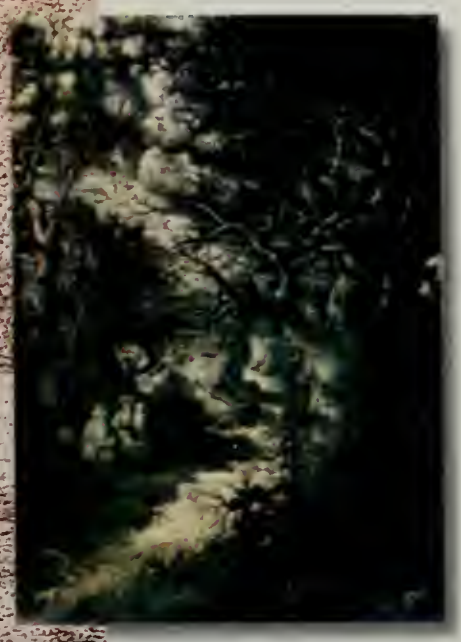
● For many years the artist worked without attracting attention, and only in 1879 – when he was forty years old – did a collection of his lithographs come out. Two years later his first one-man show was held, at the headquarters of the weekly *La Vie Moderne*; even though not even this publication reviewed the exhibition, his work did not escape the attention of the writer Joris-Karl Huysmans. The following year Redon showed about ten charcoal drawings in the editorial offices of a Paris daily newspaper, *Le Gaulois*. On this occasion the young critic Emile Hennequin, who would go on to become one of Seurat's most bitter opponents, was dazzled by Redon's art.

● In the summer of 1884 the jury of the *Salon* rejected Redon along with hundreds of young artists. Without losing heart, they unhesitatingly established their own *Société des Artistes Indépendants*, adopting – knowingly or not – the same name that Edgar Degas (1834-1917) had given to the Impressionist exhibitions. In 1886 the artist participated in the eighth and last Impressionist show, presenting some drawings, hung in a hallway; acting as a contact between him and the Impressionists may have been Armand Guillaumin (1841-1927), met at the founding assembly of the *Société*. This was a strange episode for the artist, who always remained an outsider, as John Rewald points out, "as far away from Impressionism as he was from official painting, and perhaps for this destined to remain in isolation."

◆ ARMOR
(1891, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art).
The opposition of black-color in Redon's vision provided the form for the opposition soul-body, spirit-matter. As Stefano Chiodi states, "the asceticism of black reveals itself to be a spiritual condition of the artist, inclined to melancholy, as well as a means for liberating the artist from the 'fetters of Naturalism and the Academy.'"

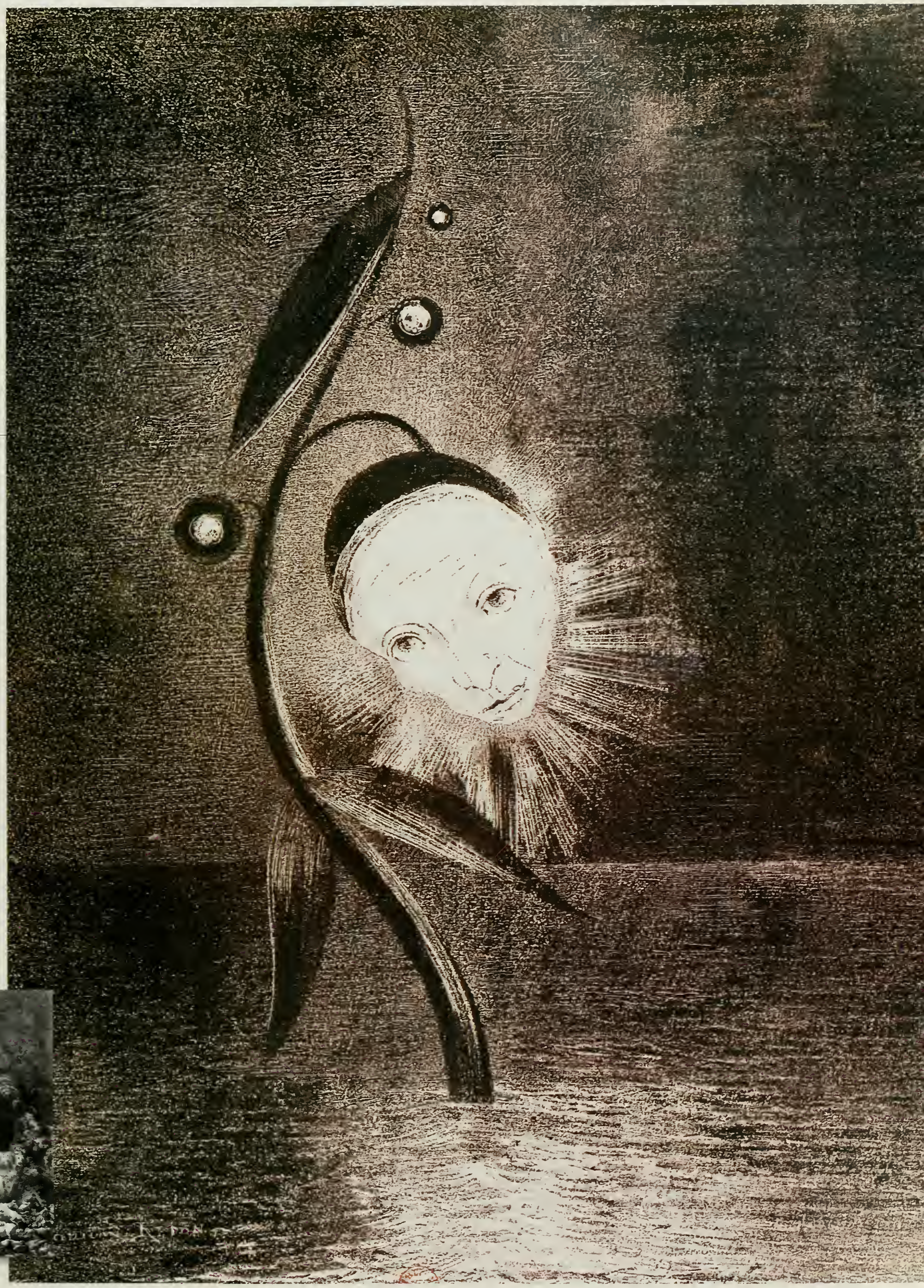
◆ THE EYE LIKE A BIZARRE BALLOON MOVES TOWARD INFINITY
(1882, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale).
The lithograph belongs to the series *To Edgar Poe*. In this flight of fantasy Redon transforms the image of contemporary progress – the hot-air balloon used in Paris during the war of 1870 – into a "vehicle for fantastic flight" (Maria Teresa Benedetti).

◆ FORD
(1865, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale).
This is one of Redon's first attempts; he did not yet feel confident with this technique, so much so that he signed "Student of Bresdin." His dependence on his teacher is in effect quite evident; from Bresdin derives the search for a "philosophical" art, with mentally conceived lines, and the fabulous conception of nature, reproduced in minute detail.



• GERMINATION (1879, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale). The lithograph belongs to the series *Dans les rêves II*, in which, along with the one dedicated To Edgar Poe, the artist refines his technique of isolating and enlarging his images, setting them loose to float on a dark ground to obtain a shadowy, horrifying effect. "I believe I have given, in the past more than now, in my drawings and lithographs, varied, human expressions; I have also, with a free fantasy, taken them into the world of the impossible, in imaginary creatures which I tried to make logical with the logic of the structure of visible creatures," Redon stated very clearly. Above: Rodolphe Bresdin, *Holy Family by a Brook* (1835, Chicago, Art Institute). He was a contradictory and problematic artist, a follower of the Bohemian life, unpracticed in life drawing; of him Baudelaire said that even if he had no talent, he had genius.

◆ SWAMP FLOWER - A SAD AND HUMAN HEAD (1885, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale). The lithograph is part of the *Hommage à Goya* series. An enormous clown head, fluorescent against a night sky, hangs from a stem; these bodiless heads, casting melancholy glances, can be met in various works by Redon and allude to the "exile of the little Odilon who consoled himself in his dreams" (Gibson). Below, Rembrandt Harmenszoon Van Rijn, *The Annunciation to the Shepherds* (1634, Hamburg, Kunsthalle). Rembrandt (1606-69) was a spiritual guide for Redon, who was able to study his works during a trip to Holland in 1878. The two artists share a preference for nighttime; in this lithograph, the mysterious evocation of the forms from the enveloping shadows transforms a traditional subject into an enigmatic work. Rembrandt's emotional interpretation of his subjects in works from these years increased his distance more and more from the Italianizing style of his teacher Pieter Lastman.



# A LOVE OF LITERATURE

In Redon's work, the presence of motifs closely connected to literature is significant, as in the case of his solitary figures deep in meditation, immersed in a twilight atmosphere. Here a lyrical, melancholy feeling prevails, which can be linked on one hand to German Romantic landscape painting and on the other to the sensibility typical of the English elegies of Thomas Gray (1716-71) or the poetry of François-René Chateaubriand (1786-1848).

● It is symptomatic that from literature Redon received his highest recognition: the first contribution to the artist's fame came from Huysmans. A certain parallel has been noted between the writer's interest in art criticism and his ideological evolution toward an increasing distance from the aesthetics of Naturalism, and Redon's work was certainly an important stage in this progression. In 1884 Huysman's novel, *A rebours*, was published, a sort of canonical model for all of *fin de siècle* Aestheticism. Chapter Five describes the collection of des Esseintes, the protagonist. Among works by Moreau, Jan Adam Luyken (1649-1712), and Bresdin, there are Redon's charcoals "outside everything, going beyond the limits of painting, renewing a fantastic that is completely special, a fantastic of sickness and delirium." The novel set off a veritable sensation regarding the artist, bringing him into contact with leading literary circles, and primarily with Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-98), who would become his close friend.

◆ CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH
*Monk by the Sea*
(1809, Berlin, Staatliche Schlösser und Gärten, Schloss Charlottenburg). The painting by the leading German Romantic landscape painter shows a man alone in front of the infinite; he is Friedrich himself, at a sort of unreachable distance.

◆ ANTHONY: "WHAT IS THE PURPOSE IN ALL THIS?" DEMON: "THERE IS NO PURPOSE"
(1896, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale). The lithograph is part of the series *The Temptation of St Anthony*. The images of writers (here Flaubert) show how Redon always translates his literary stimulus into visual language.

● The artist's fame grew also outside France; in 1886 Redon was invited to Belgium to participate in an exhibition of the *Cercle des XX*, an association of independent artists. He was warmly welcomed, but the press attacked him violently, and Redon found himself at the center of an unexpected success fed by the scandal, which brought his work to the attention of literary circles also in that country. Edmond Picard (1836-1924), one of the outstanding figures in Belgian cultural and political life, in 1887 asked Redon to illustrate his play *Le Juré*. This collaboration brought Redon many other commissions from the major Belgian poets of the time.

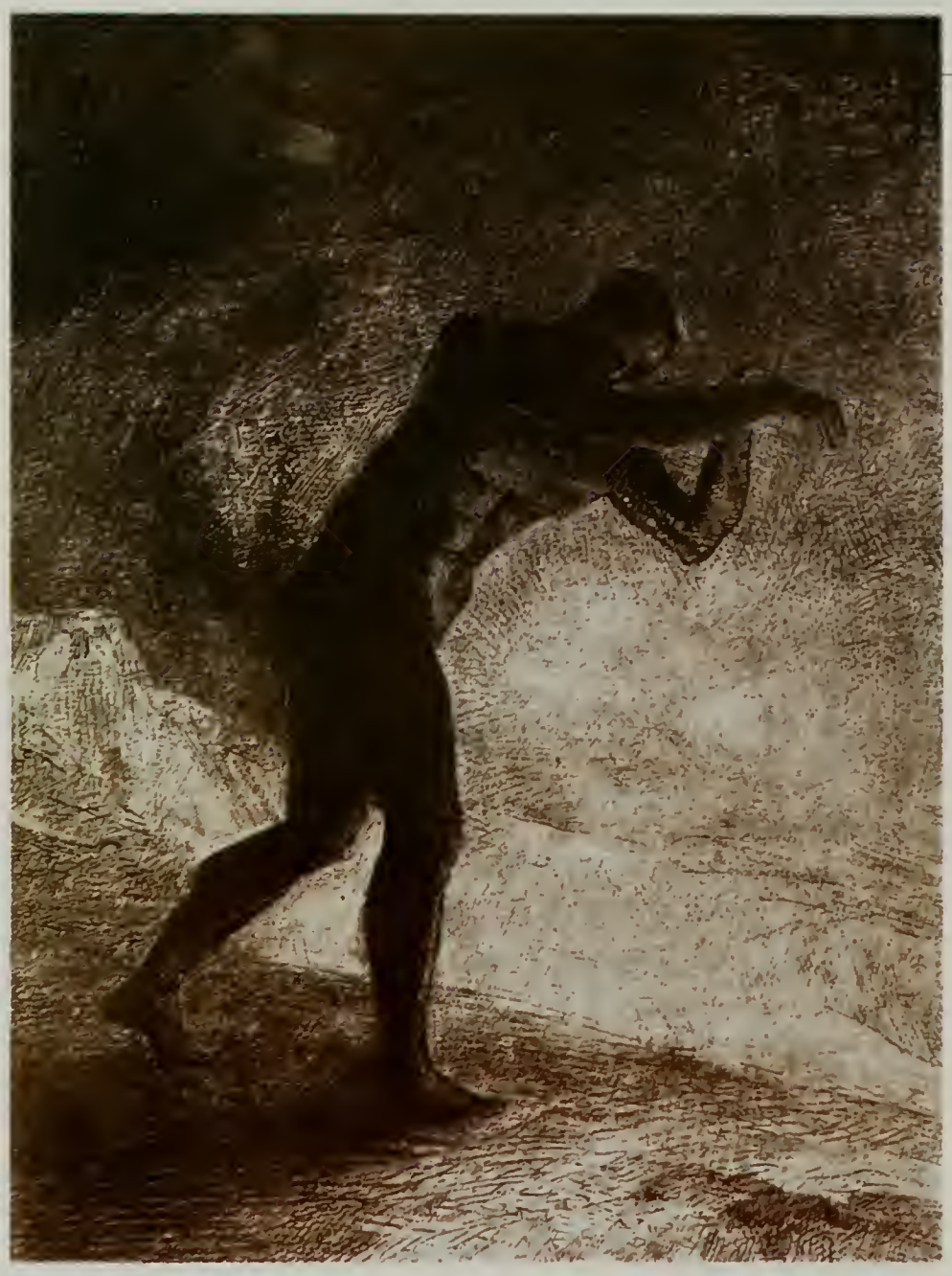
◆ RUGGERO AND ANGELICA (1909-10, Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum). In Redon's progress from the real to the visionary, this subject, which he treated various times, attracted the artist both for its fabulous nature, which gave him the opportunity to transform the tale into a dream vision, and for its symbolic connotations of the fight between good and evil and the flight toward the spiritual. The hero's action could refer to the role of the artist, who draws beauty from formless matter.

# REALITY AT THE SERVICE OF IMAGINATION

Redon worked out a personal, highly refined spiritual and philosophic vision, fed by a Spinozan pantheism, filtered through the biology and Romantic evolutionism of Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) and the theories of Charles Darwin. The title of a panel from his album *Les origines* (1883) is: "When life awakened in the depths of matter." The artist, shunning any kind of flight or escape into the supernatural, typical of nineteenth century artists and the Symbolists, faced the anguished reality of matter and time and retraced the "ascending" process of the Romantics as a slow descent along the evolutionary chain, to reach the primordial stages.

● This original mixture of mythic imagination and scientific theory cannot be interpreted as a morbid interest in monstrosity or the delirium of a deranged mind: the invention of monsters was for Redon the fruit of an essentially artistic research, one that forms, as he himself says, "improbable beings according to the laws of probability, placing, insofar as possible, the logic of the visible at the service of the invisible." Thus the painter did not simply imitate nature but studied its laws, its deep inner structure, until he graped the invisible principle, that is to say, the cosmic spiritual force which moves the machine of earth and the universe.

● The creatures born from the artist's fantasy were often inspired by examples he had seen at the Museum of Natural History, and Darwin's *Origin of Species* was one of his favorite readings. But the theory of evolution was only a means for investigating the passage from the biological world to the spiritual one, "in the attempt," as the art historian Maria Teresa Benedetti maintains, "to get the point where the residue of the physical element enters the spiritual zone."

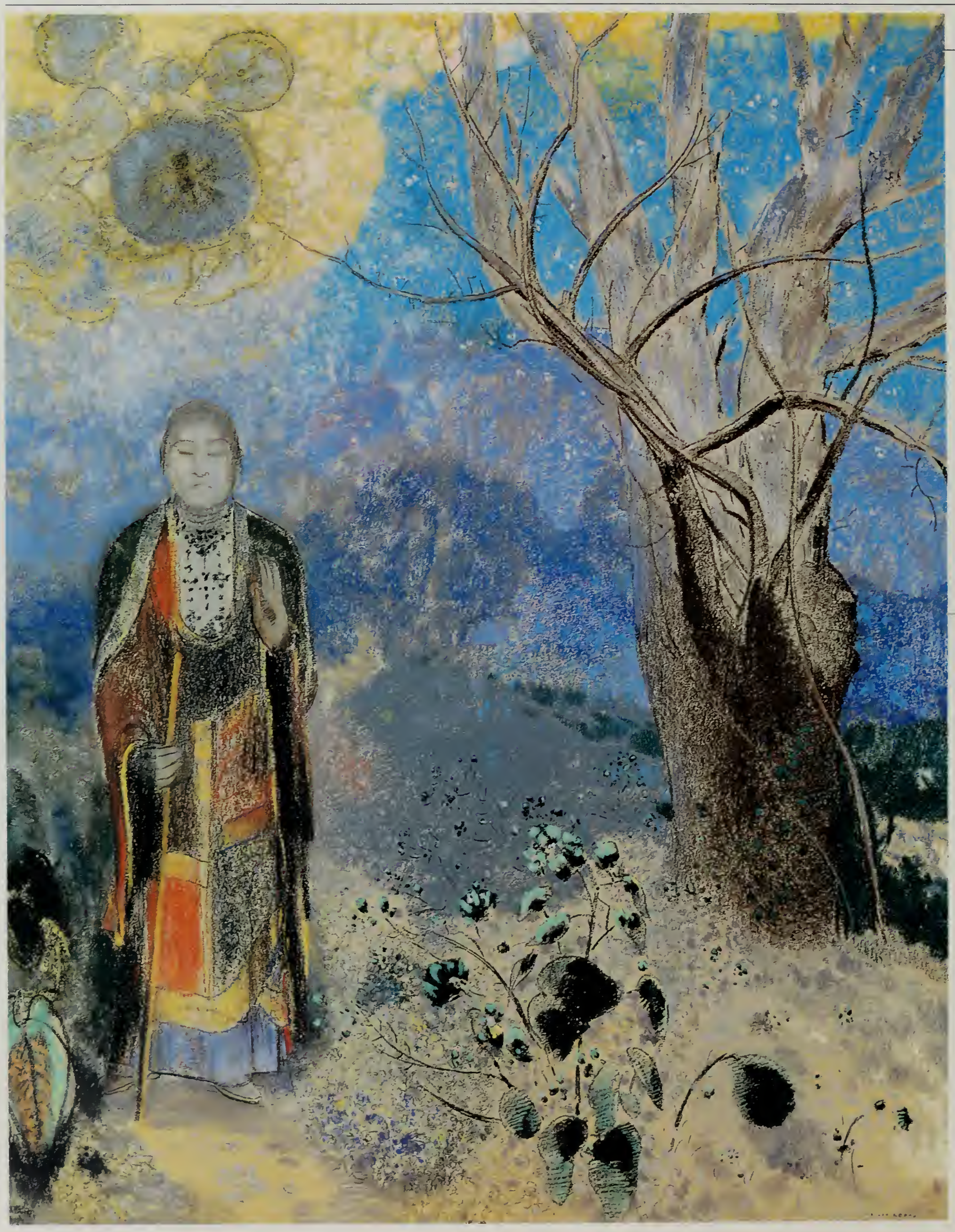


● The close friendship between Redon and the biologist Armand Clavaud, whose work, as the painter said, "was carried out in the infinitely small," helped the artist to see no longer with the naked eye on a normal scale, as could have been the case with the Impressionists. He extracted from the organic context the data of nature in order to offer it as isolated fragments, often surrounded by a void, seeking on canvas the "teeming" and "pulsating" effects he had seen through the microscope.

• "AND MAN APPEARED, QUESTIONING THE GROUND FROM WHICH HE EMERGES AND THAT ATTRACTS HIM, PAVED THE WAY TOWARD OBSCURE BRIGHTNESS..."
(1883, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale). The lithograph belongs to the series *Les Origines, VIII*. The engraving, with a Rembrandt-like quality, expresses the painter's philosophic concept: man, reduced to a shadow, stumbles about on a desolate planet, while a blinding light in the background forces him to seek refuge by bending over himself.

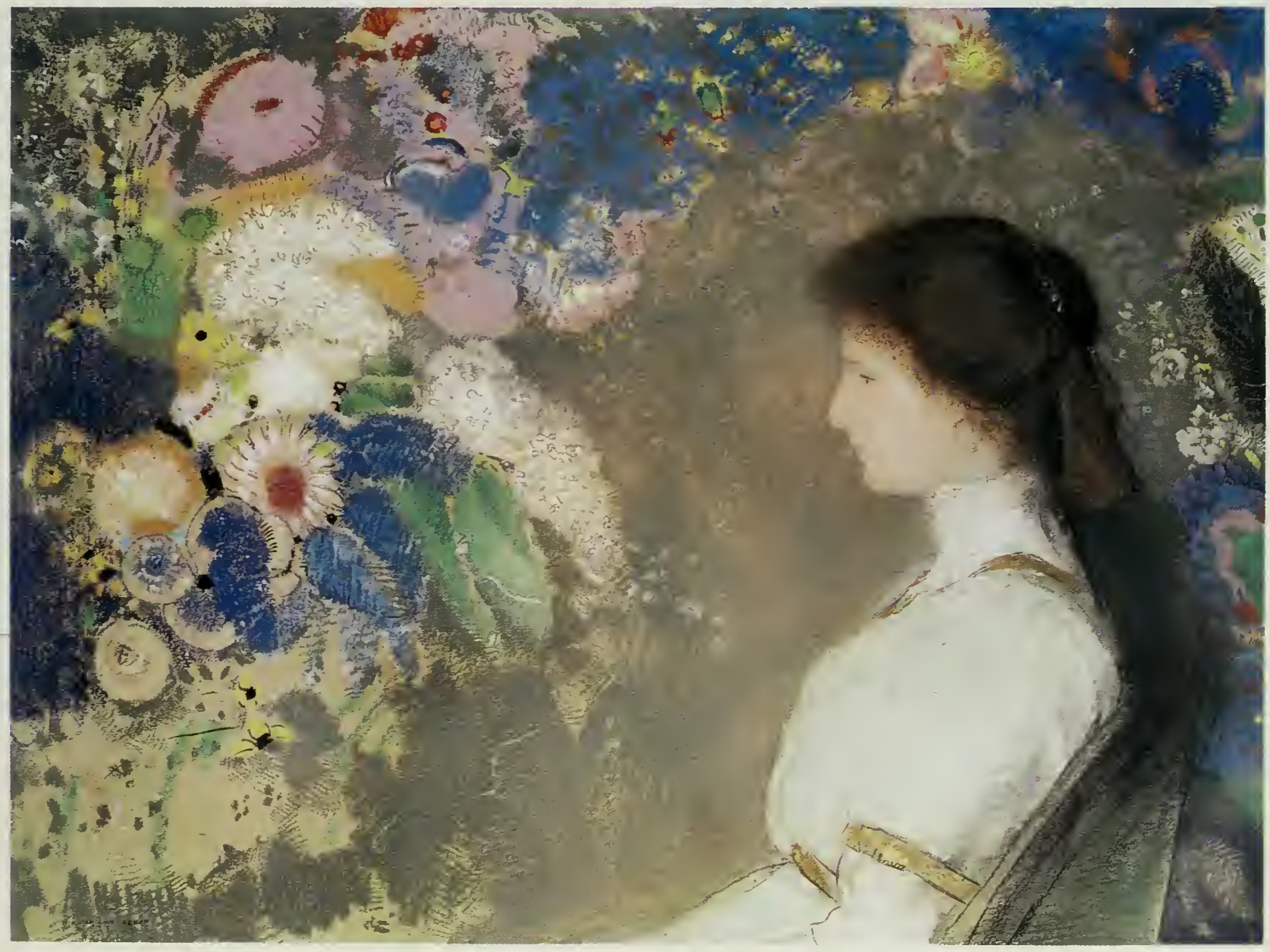
• PORTRAIT OF HIS SON ARÏ
(1897, Chicago, Art Institute). The boy's face emerges from a light, bright background, scattered with flowers of different shapes and colors. After the early death of his first son, in 1889 his second child Arï was born, called by Thadée Natanson "the most reserved and saddest young man."

• PEYRELEBADE, FAMILY PROPERTY NEAR LISTRAC (GIRONDE)
(n.d., Paris, Musée d'Orsay). Although Redon is not a typical landscape painter, he painted in the early years of his career some views *en plein air*. These pictures show a certain affinity with landscapes by Corot and the Impressionists, in their rendering of the atmosphere and the material quality of the light, the light colors, and free brushwork.



◆ MYSTIC BOAT
(1890-95, New York, Ian Woodner Family Collection). "Painting is using a special sense, an innate sense, to construct a beautiful substance," the painter stated after passing from the inferno of the *Noirs* to the light of color. After his marriage and regained fatherhood, the sale of Peyrelebade and his first success, a new world opened to Redon, made up of dappled color and clear light.

◆ BUDDHA
(1906, Paris, Musée d'Orsay). Redon's friend Clavaud also passed on to him his interest in Oriental philosophies and Hindu poetry. The Buddha (from the Sanskrit "enlightened") in his monumental fixity is compared to the Tree of Clearsightedness, whose golden flowers crown the sage like a halo.



◆ VIOLETTE HEYMANN
(1909, Cleveland, Museum of Art). This is not a portrait against a floral background or with a floral frame as in seventeenth-century paintings. The uniqueness of this work lies in having placed the two subjects on the same plane, making them both the protagonists of the picture. The left half of the canvas is taken up by the radiant vegetable world, counterpoised to the woman's delicate profile and the light colors of her clothes on the right.

♦ WOMAN AMONG THE FLOWERS (1909-10, New York, private collection). Another female profile surrounded by flowers: this time, however, the blurred profile of the woman is only a pretext for presenting a cascade of brilliantly colored flowers and comparing the melancholy of a face with their vibrant splendor. These are mental images pervaded by a linear decorativism and preciousness of color typical of *Art Nouveau*, which call to mind analogous compositions by Gustav Klimt (1862-1918). The pastel is articulated along two vertical bands: the one on the left shows, against a neutral background teeming with cells and micro-organisms, a triumph of leaves and flowers; in the one on the right, a murky female profile stands out against a red ground.

♦ ST SEBASTIAN (1910, Basel, Kunstmuseum). Redon transforms a typical Christian iconography into a cosmic image, in which the natural world, human life, and the divine sphere are regulated by the same laws of universal love. St Sebastian, tied to a massive trunk whose bare branches reach to the sky (an image of death), has his feet wreathed in flowering branches (referring to life after death). The saint's sacrifice takes place in a profound feeling of harmony with the laws of nature.

• RED TREE (1906, private collection). "Suggestive art cannot give anything except by using only the mysterious play of shadows and the rhythm of mentally conceived lines," wrote Redon in his *Confidences d'artiste*. Perhaps to give a stronger sense of mystery, the titles of his works are always vague. For the characteristic shape of the head, the figure seated beneath the tree could be identified as the Shakyamuni who achieved illumination and became the Buddha under a *ficus religiosa*.

• MADAME REDON (1882, Paris, Musée d'Orsay). The painting, made by Redon right in the midst of his Noir phase, is one of the few paintings which can be securely dated and is thus an important document for evaluating Redon's artistic culture and stylistic choices in the early 1880s. The portrait, painted from life, is based on sober tones, earth colors and blacks, brightened only by the luminous note of her

Above, *Eve* (1904, Paris, Musée d'Orsay). In the preceding version, in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the woman has a towel wrapped around her arm, later eliminated, an evident reference to the *Valpinçon Bather* by Ingres. In his treatment of the nude, which occupied Redon's attention for over sixty years, the reference to Ingres is fundamental, even though he eschewed the polished surfaces of the neoclassical painter.

white collar, echoed by the daisy in her hair. As in many other portraits painted for relatives and friends, Camille's face is depicted with scrupulous attention, and Redon patiently seeks an effect of simplicity and synthesis. The measure, rigor, and formal control of this work recall the monumental and at the same time realistic firmness of the images of Edgar Degas.

ODILON REDON

ODILON REDON
1890

◆ WITH CLOSED EYES (1890, Paris, Musée d'Orsay). The picture, signed and dated by the artist, a rare occurrence with Redon, is one of the first to affirm Redon's late conversion to color. This passage from night to day is seen progressively in the series dedicated to enormous figures with closed eyes, here rising like the sun above the horizon. Redon's canvas can be read as a Christ-like image of Resurrection. It seems that in the last decade of the nineteenth century, Redon came out of a profound spiritual crisis which was linked to difficult personal experiences.

◆ BRETON VILLAGE (c. 1890, private collection). In this painting from life, compositionally similar to Corot (as in the houses immersed in a sunny atmosphere), Redon inserts some free brushstrokes of pure color in the Impressionist manner.

◆ VIEW OF VENICE (Bordeaux, Musée des Beaux-Arts). The artist does not choose to depict a characteristic corner of the city but takes a viewpoint that allows him to render the material quality of the paint. His brushstroke is more Impressionistic in the water of the lagoon, recreating the play of light on its choppy surface.

# TOWARD COLOR

In 1902 Redon wrote in a letter to Maurice Fabre that he had not succeeded in doing a charcoal drawing and that only the use of new materials could save him; he thus decided to "marry color." Starting in the last decade of the nineteenth century, we find in Redon's artistic development a veritable "conversion": sixty years old, with no financial worries, the artist turned significantly in a new direction, moving toward a bright palette of pure tones which create lively material and light effects.

● In terms of subject, we also see a progressive decline in the use of the more visionary motifs that characterized the preceding period. This change does not imply, however, a renunciation of the central role of the imagination: Redon would never try to imitate nature, and his art would remain essentially lyrical and poetic, maintaining a certain continuity of theme and subject.

● Numerous hypotheses have been offered to explain a change so radical as to be incomprehensbile even to many of his contemporaries. The artist was certainly affected by the loss of the property at Peyrelebade, the "cradle of the *Noirs*" since the beginning, an event which contributed to Redon's sense of rootlessness but was also "an immense, unimaginable relief," as it detached him from the anguished, pessimistic connotations of his preceding phase: "Where are my blacks now?" he asked in 1901. Another important element was the birth of his second child – after his first baby had died very early – which the artist perceived as a resurrection and a personal triumph.

● Alongside these factors, other causes contributed to Redon's "conversion." Many conditions which in the 1890s had favored the artist's tie with literary circles, like the hostility of the critics and his refusals by the *Salon*, fell away in the next decade. The ascent of the Symbolist generation was an accomplished fact, and the traditional system of the *Salons* was being replaced by the dual referents of art critic and gallery.

◆ SILENCE (1911, New York, Museum of Modern Art). The face, which asks for silence from an oval opening, seems to emerge from the depths of the unconscious. The subtly colored image, with lowered eyes, invites the viewer to listen to the silence of his inner voice.

◆ FERNAND KHNOPFF
*Silence*
(n.d., Brussels, Musée des Beaux-Arts)
Khnopff (1858-1921), a Belgian painter educated in Paris, is one of the most refined figures of European Symbolism. He created rarefied and disquieting atmospheres with mystical overtones, achieving results in some ways similar to Redon's.

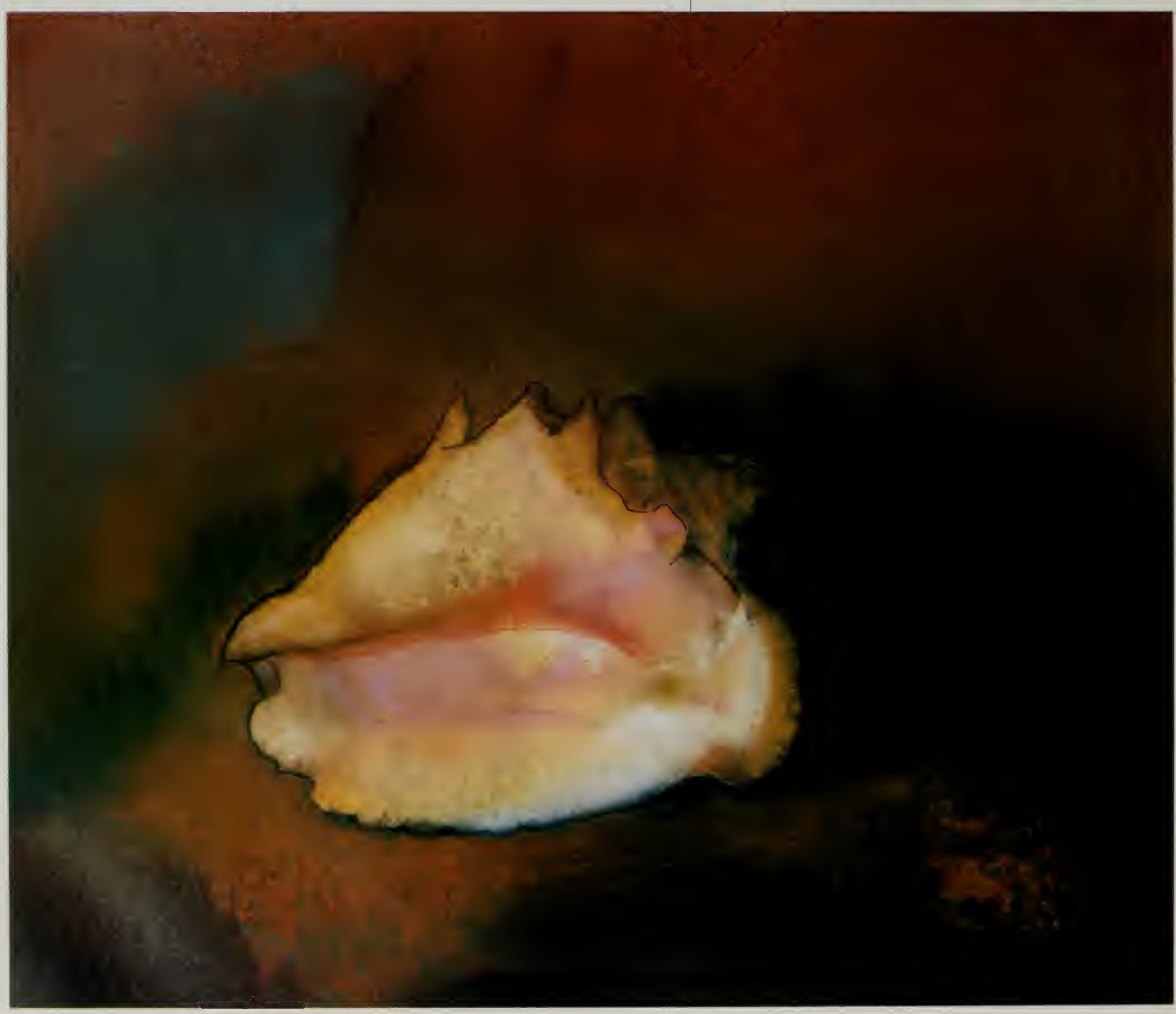
◆ THE CHARIOT OF APOLLO (1905-14, Paris, Musée d'Orsay). In his last years, the artist was attracted by the myth of Apollo. "It is the triumph of light over darkness. It is the joy of full luminousness counterpoised to the melancholy of the night," he declared about Delacroix's fresco, *Apollo Defeating Python* on the ceiling of the Louvre.

♦ PEGASUS
(1914, The Hague, Gemeentemuseum). In the spiritual voyage from darkness to light, mythological themes return: the new media used, like pastels and oils, favor the expression of a figurative language based on arabesque and line. Pegasus becomes a metaphor for the dominion of the intellect over the more elementary forms of life and the spirit's longing to lift itself above matter and overcome the limits of the body.

♦ APPARITION
(1905, Princeton, Princeton University Art Museum). The mystical apparition of the two figures, of whom one is in a cloud, out of mysterious depths is accompanied by explosions of life in constant transformation. Above, Paul Gauguin, *Yellow Christ* (1886, Paris, Musée d'Orsay). Redon met Gauguin in 1886 during an exhibition, and they became friends in the last two decades of the century. This tie may have influenced in some measure the sudden appearance of color and Christ-themes in Redon's work.

• MYSTERY OF THE SEA (c. 1903, Tokyo, Art Point Gallery). The works from these years reveal a musical freedom, which gives life to fantasies dedicated to the play of color and unexpected associations of shapes. At right: *Underwater Vision* (1910, private collection). These are the years of Cubism, but these works show no trace of it. Redon is completely absorbed in studying the sparkling of colors and matter.

• SHELL (1912, Paris, Musée d'Orsay). The simple subject, painted from life – the shell which decorated the mantel of the fireplace in his house and was carefully preserved by his son – was transformed by the artist, thanks to the soft, blurring colors, into a vision. The shell, symbol of intact female sexuality, is a metaphor for the relationship linking women to the natural sphere.

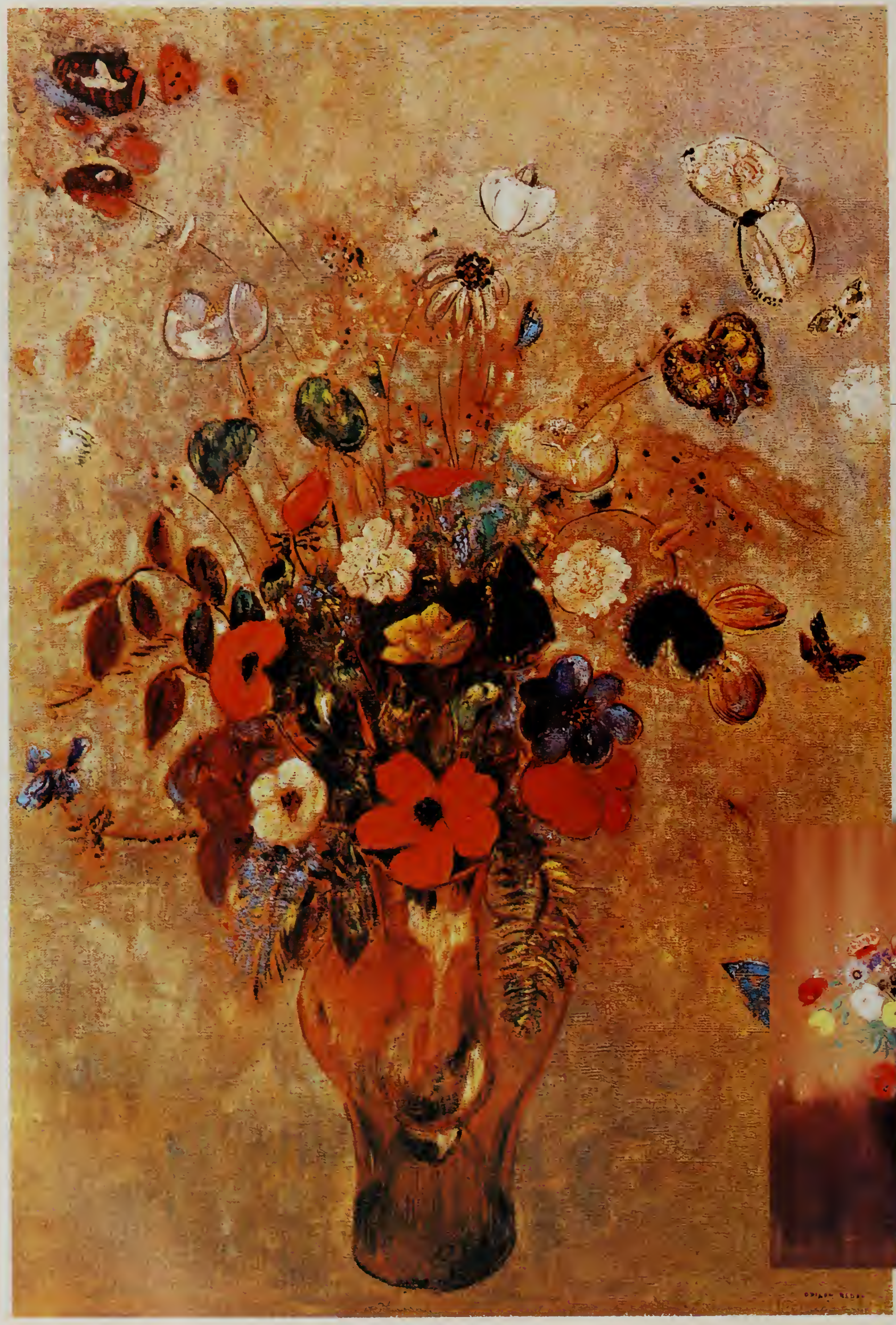


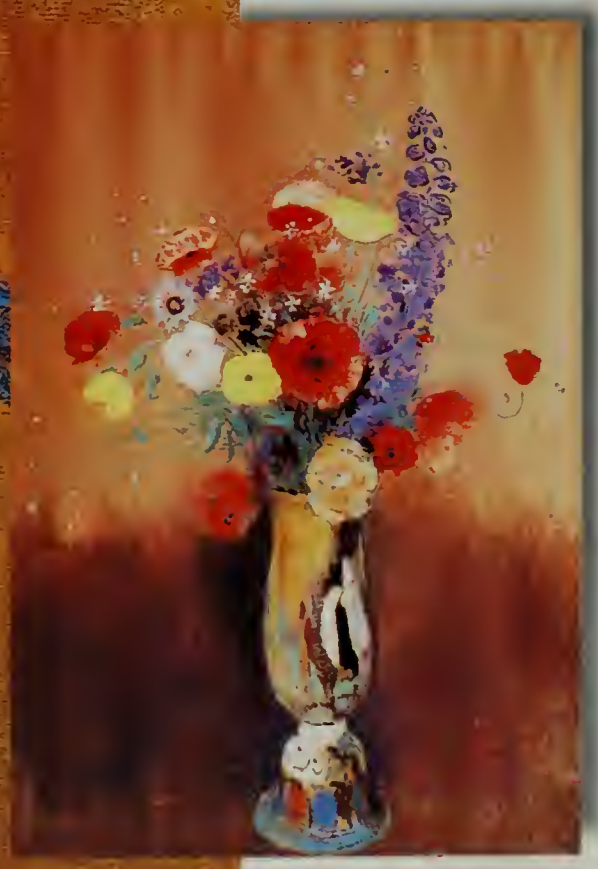
• NIGHT
(1910-11, Fontfroide, abbey library, detail). In the last fifteen years of his life, Redon worked on the decoration of three private homes: for the composer Ernest Chausson in Paris in 1901, Robert de Domecy in Burgundy in 1902, and this last for Gustav Fayet. The experience, besides allowing the artist to try out his vision of color on large spaces, offered him a direct contact with the Mediterranean landscape and light.

• DAY
(1910-11, Fontfroide, abbey library, detail). The cycle is the triumph of Redon's art. It synthesizes his entire artistic development, from his beginning with the *Noirs*, perceived in the austere atmosphere of *Night* which revives the melancholy experiences of his past, to the free singing color of *Day*; here the artist expresses fully a cosmic vision of the beauty and magic of the outer world and its reflection in the sphere of the spirit.

◆ OPHELIA AMONG THE FLOWERS
(n.d., London, National Gallery).
The subject of Ophelia gone mad, who sings as she floats along in the current, fascinated Redon also for the juxtaposition of flowers with a female figure, one of his favorites. In this pastel the flowers take up almost all the space, relegating the girl's profile to the right corner. Ophelia, crowned by a garland of white flowers repeated by those around her neck, looks at her reflection in the wavy surface of water and seems to be singing "snatches of old tunes,/ As one incapable of her own distress,/ Or like a creature native and indued/ Unto that element" (*Hamlet*, act IV, scene 7). In another pastel of *Ophelia* datable to 1900-05 (New York, private collection) the flowers seem to take shape from her breast, while blood red spots on her neck refer precisely to the flowers called "dead men's fingers" mentioned by Shakespeare.

◆ JOHN EVERETT MILLAIS
*Ophelia*
(1852, London, Tate Gallery).
Millais, with Dante Gabriele Rossetti (1828-82) and William Holman Hunt (1827-1910) formed in 1840 the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood; this artistic movement, supported by the critic John Ruskin (1819-1900), aimed at a return to the simplicity and spontaneity of the Italian "primitives" before Raphael. Rossetti's wife Elizabeth Siddal posed for this work, floating fully dressed in a tub of water. The painter plucked the chords of pathos and sentimentalism, while yet remaining anchored to a naturalistic vision. The willow branches reflected in the glassy water are described with pronounced naturalism, and Rossetti offers a faithful transposition of the poet's words. The moment depicted is that right before Ophelia drowned, when "Her clothes spread wide,/ And mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up" (*Hamlet*, act IV, scene 7).





• BOUQUET OF FLOWERS AND BUTTERFLIES (n.d., private collection).
An important role in the last phase of Redon's artistic production is played by flowers, especially wildflowers, which "corresponded to his earth-bound nature" (Jean Cassou). The flowers and butterflies unite in Redon's eyes the dual symbolic meaning of youth that passes and beauty that fades, but refer also to the living beauty and spirituality of nature. Both the flowers, with their wing-like petals, and the butterflies, multicolored like flowers, take shape out of an undefined background and appear as though suspended: they are clear visions which evoke images already existing in the observer's mind, apparitions of "another" world. Below: *Vase with Flowers* (n.d., Paris, Louvre).

• VASE OF FLOWERS (n.d., Paris, Musée d'Orsay). The compact form of this bouquet of wildflowers, dominated by a large red poppy, floats on an undefined ground. There is no hint at space, no plane on which the vase rests, no shadow; Redon shows no interest for elements other than the shapes and colors of the flowers, trying to communicate with simple pictorial means a sensation of inner life in nature. He chooses wildflowers, because his imagination is attracted by the vegetable world, and copies their forms with no fear of falling into a realistic transcription of his models. But then he isolates them, trying to show the infinite expressive, emotional, and evocative potential of shape and color, and this is where Redon's original creative process comes into play. Above: *Bouquet of Anemones* (n.d., Paris, Petit Palais).

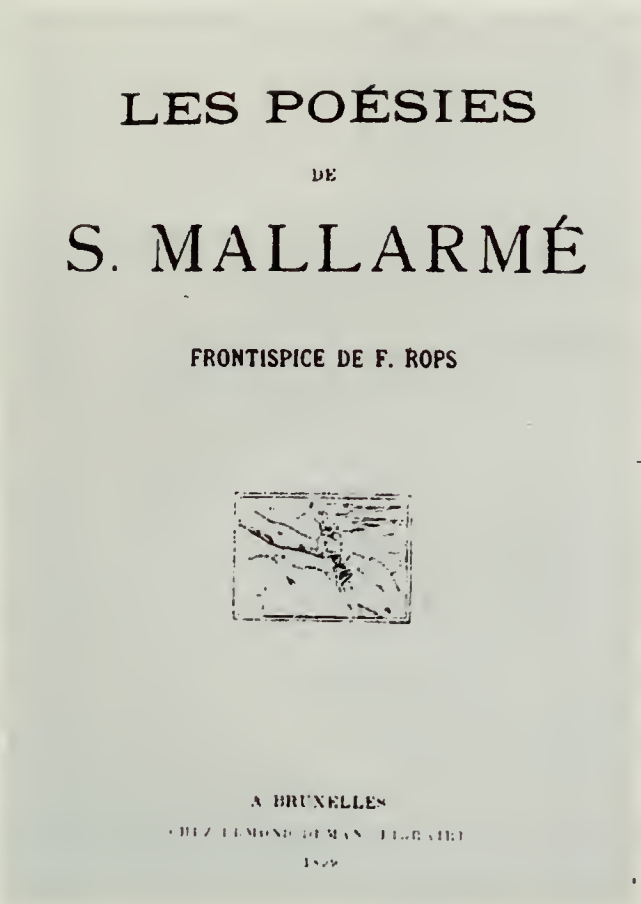
# SYMBOLISTS AND DECADENTS

The year 1886, that of the Boulangiste Parliamentary crisis which threatened the French Third Republic, was also an important date from the artistic point of view: it was the year when Georges Seurat (1859-91) finished *La Grand Jatte* and the date that marked the birth of literary Symbolism, with the manifesto written by Jean Moréas (1856-1910), which dictated the rules of the new movement: "Art must seek in objectivity only a simple and succinct point of departure," Moréas affirmed at the end of the manifesto. Redon had already written in a review of the *Salon* in 1868: "Although recognizing the substantial need for 'seen' reality, true art is in 'felt' reality." Poets like Paul Verlaine (1844-76), Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-98) and Charles Baudelaire (1821-67) were acclaimed as the fathers of Symbolism. A series of little magazines, *Lutèce, Revue Indépendant, La Pleiade, La Vogue*, published by Gustave Kahn (1859-1936), *Le Décadent, Le Symbolist*, which ceased publication after four issues, were the vehicle for the spread of the new principles of an art which offered itself as esoteric and decadent, not destined for the masses.

● Some of these writers, like the already mentioned Huysmans, Hennequin, Teodor Wyzewa (1862-1917), indifferent to the innovations introduced by Seurat and the post-Impressionists, took a position on Redon's side; and the poet Mallarmé, too, recognized the painter's intellectual and artistic qualities. Among the artists, those of Redon's generation or slightly older than he, did not appreciate his work. Moreau, so greatly admired by Redon,

◆ EUGENE CARRIERE
*Verlaine*
(1890, Paris, Louvre). From 1890 onwards, the Café Voltaire became the meeting place for the Symbolists, just as the Café Nouvelles-Athenes had been for the Impressionists; among the group was Carrrière (1849-1906), the friend of men of letters and of artists, founder with Puvis de Chavannes and the sculptor Auguste Rodin of the *Société National des Beaux-Arts.*

said: "I see good kind individuals like Redon... But after all, what sad results!" But among the younger generation, the first to become aware of Redon was Emile Bernard (1868-1941), who however, in a celebrated article, "stuck in," as the art historian Renato Barilli observes, "all the commonplaces about Redon's art" : "prison," "nightmare work," conceived by "a black soul" given over to "infernal spells." All these terms were underlined and contradicted by Redon himself, who noted in the margin of the article: "I am not a prisoner my soul is not black I bless life which makes me love the sun the flowers and all the splendors of the outside world."


LES POÉSIES

DE

S. MALLARMÉ

FRONTISPICE DE F. ROPS

A BRUXELLES

1899

◆ TITLE-PAGE OF THE POEMS OF MALLARMÉ

The title-page of the 1895 edition was illustrated by Félicien Rops (1833-98), lithographer and engraver of Belgian origin who belonged to the group of the *XX* and settled in Paris in 1876. His creations, with a Romantic and Symbolist inspiration, reveal a strong erotic and satanic accent, which would increasingly become the characteristic element of his work.

◆ CARAN D'ACHE

*Russian Exposition*

(1895, Paris, Musée des Arts Decoratifs).

Caran D'Ache, pseudonym of Emmanuel Poire (1858-1909), a caricaturist born in Moscow who lived in Paris after 1878, was one of the liveliest and most active interpreters of the Belle Epoque. He contributed to numerous magazines, including *Le Chat Noir*, with his characteristic wordless cartoons. This poster advertises the flight of the hot-air balloon.

◆ MAURICE DENIS

*Homage to Cézanne*

(1900, Paris, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris).

The work by Denis (1870-1943) shows a still-life by Cézanne and the *Nabis* group, made up of Vuillard, Vollard, Denis, Serusier, Ranson, Roussel, Bonnard, Marthe Denis, and at a slight distance from the group, in the left foreground, Redon, considered an inspirer along with Cézanne.

◆ FERDINAND HODLER

*Night*

(1890, Bern, Kunstmuseum).

The Swiss painter (1853-1918) had his first direct contact with Symbolism through literature. His symbolic pictures, characterized by vigorous modeling and symmetrical rhythmical compositions, play an important role in the Munich and Vienna Secessions.

# IN REDON'S FOOTSTEPS

The birth of Cubism is usually set in the year 1906; by this time, the art of Redon and more generally all of Symbolism was now out of date and had decidedly been left behind. The fundamental reason for the end of Symbolism is found in the movement's strong tie with Naturalism and its content of sensations and sensual elements more or less sublimated, stylized, or idealized. Naturally Redon, and other painters like him, continued their own personal aesthetic development in the field of sensualism and "metaphorical art" even when the context was no longer favorable.

● For having courageously taken a different path from the dominant one of a photographic type of Naturalism, which triumphed between the 1870s and 1880s, and for being a forerunner of the aesthetic of post-Impressionism, younger artists showed a special interest in Redon toward the end of the century. Traces of his vision can be found, for example, in the work of various painters among the *Nabis*, who proposed an evocative art,

capable of inspiring elevated spiritual concepts through the use of a symbolic language.

● Many European artists were influenced in various ways by French Symbolism and Redon's visionary fantasy: among these were Edvard Munch (1863-1944), whose dark northern spirit mixed with decorative French Symbolism, and the Belgian James Ensor (1860-1949), a member of the *Société des XX*, an association created in 1884 in Brussels to bring together the best elements from the Low Countries but open to all the artistic ferment of the rest of Europe. Ensor grafted onto a Symbolist vein derived from the French artists a visionary imagination and a taste for the grotesque which he took from painters like Bruegel and Bosch and placed at the service of harsh social criticism. Artists like Fernand Khnopff (1858-1921) were more oriented toward a Symbolist kind of decorativism, as was Jan Toorop (1858-1928), who modified his early Divisionist style as a result of contact with Redon and the English graphic artist Aubrey Beardsley (1872-98).

● Redon's reservations concerning Impresisonist art, along with his refusal of everyday subjects, anticipated some of the motives for what would be the "dichotomy of much modern art between a photographic formalism and the area that would be called Surrealism" (Marisa Volpi). And perhaps even more than in the early Surrealists, too neo-Platonic and Olympian, Redon's lesson would be brought up-to-date by the second wave of Surrealism tied to the Informal currents. It is not wrong to see Redon also as a father of the magical flowering of spatters and symbols as though springing from the unconscious, in artists like Wols (1913-51), Jean Fautrier (1898-1964), or Arshile Gorky (1904-48).

◆ RENÉ MAGRITTE
*False Mirror*
(1935, private collection).
The symbolic value of Redon's eye – the artist's gaze on the outside world – did not escape the Belgian painter. But if the eyes are the mirror of the soul, the oversize eye of Magritte (1898-1967) is a *False Mirror*, which, like a play of exchange between reality and fiction typical of the Surrealists, reflects the outside, showing us a sky striped with clouds.

◆ EDVARD MUNCH
*Puberty*
(1894, Oslo, Nasjonalgalleriet).
The evocative power of the black shadow which emerges from the girl's side like a deadly foreshadowing recalls the melancholy of Redon's *Noirs*. The Norwegian painter deals with the theme of the awakening to love, a favorite of the Symbolists; the adolescent covering her pubic area is show in all her fragility in the face of her burgeoning sexuality.

◆ ARSHILE GORKY
*Nuptials II*
(1947, New York, Whitney Museum).
The language of the last phase of the Armenian artist, who emigrated to America in 1920, achieved original results when he moved away from Cubist decomposition to approach the forms of Surrealism. Around the 1940s, his floating forms seem to emerge from the depths like those of Redon.

# THE ARTISTIC JOURNEY

## For an overall view of Redon's production, we provide a chronological catalogue of his principal works

◆ SELF-PORTRAIT (1867)
After leaving the *atelier* of the academic painter Léon Gérôme and his new friendship with Bresdin, thanks to the influence of his friend Armand Clavaud, Redon seems to have chosen the path of a metaphorical, suggestive art, as this self-portrait, in a private collection, testifies, offering the image of a reserved young man, given to introspection.

◆ LANDSCAPE AT PEYRELEBADE (1880)
Peyrelebade is the family property where Redon spent his early childhood, away from his closest family. These sad, melancholy memories would mark all his early, prevalently graphic production, which the artist called *Les Noirs*. A small number of landscapes like this one, painted *sur le motif*, are the only evidence of a style largely influenced by Corot.

◆ SMILING SPIDER (1881)
This monstrous creature, born of Redon's imagination and described by Huysmans in his *A Rebors* as "a frightening spider with a human face planted in the middle of its body," was inspired by Goya; but, as can be seen in the animal's smile and infantile, upturned gaze, Redon's temperament is less ferocious than that of the Spanish painter.

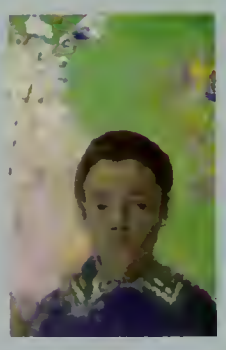
◆ THE EYE LIKE A BIZARRE BALLOON MOVES TOWARD INFINITY (1882)
The theme of the eye and the chopped-off head is frequent in the artist's work, perhaps related to his childhood lived as a period of mourning. The eye turned toward the sky could allude to the sublimation of his situation through art: the hot-air balloon, a symbol of progress used in the war of 1870, becomes a symbol of spiritual ascent.

◆ MADAME REDON (1882)
On May 1, 1880, Redon married Camille Falle, a Creole woman from the island of Bourbon in Madagascar. The portrait, done right in the middle of his *Noir* period, is painted from life, with a structure influenced by classical portrait tradition – particularly Florentine – interpreted in a modern key, in a painting style based on tonal chords of essential colors.

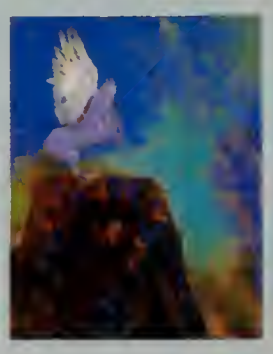
◆ SWAMP FLOWER – A SAD AND HUMAN HEAD (1885)
The lithograph shows a head on a stem which, Huysmans writes, denotes "at the same time the suffering of a used Pierrot, of an old clown crying on his withered features, and the anxiety of an ancient lord devoured by spleen." These hallucinations fascinated Mallarmé: "The Dream head, this swamp flower, lights with a light that only he knows."

◆ WITH CLOSED EYES (1890)
The painting, the first work by the artist purchased by the state, is also one of the first works in which we find a Redon conquered by color and light. After the sale of Peyrelebade, his first success, and the birth of his son Arï, at the age of 50 the painter decided to "marry color." The androgynous body arising from the water could symbolize this rebirth.

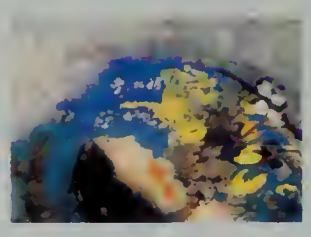
◆ CYCLOPS (1895-1900)
"My drawings aim at representing the invisible with the logic and truth of the visible:" this logic is found also in the figure of the Cyclops, which emerges from the shadows and takes us back to the disquieting climate of the *Noirs*. The foreground where the nymph Galatea sleeps, embraced by the ground of which she seems to be an integral part, announces Redon's new pictorial vision.



◆ PORTRAIT OF HIS SON ARÏ (1897)
Arï, a shy, reserved boy, brought up without constraints or rules, in total freedom, had a very intense relationship with his father, who after the early death of his first child saw Arï's birth as a personal conquest. In the portrait the frontal image of the young boy in the foreground stands out against a background of flowers with soft chromatic chords which evoke Redon's new spiritual condition.



◆ PEGASUS (c. 1900)
A recurrent theme in Redon's late work, Pegasus becomes the symbol of the spirit freed from matter and a metaphor for his artistic development: from the inferno of the Noirs to the luminousness of color. An iconographical connection has been noted between *Pegasus* and Moreau's *Chimera* of 1862. The pastel is currently in the Hiroshima Museum of Art.

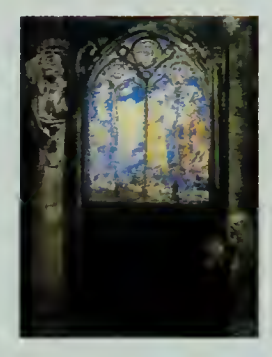


◆ OPHELIA (1900-05)
The girl, carried along by the water together with the garlands of flowers she has woven, is depicted by Redon using his new luminous language. The juxtaposition of female figures with flowers is typical of *Art Nouveau* and of painters like Klimt. Here Redon overturns the traditional relationship between figure and flowered background, no longer a support or frame for the subject but a co-protagonist of the picture.

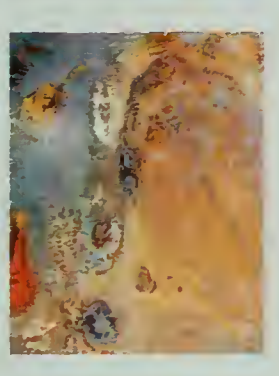
◆ WOMAN AND CENTAUR (1900-10)
The decorative use of color, which he explored contemporarily with the *Nabis*, gave new sustenance to the painter's imagination, as he returned in these years to his repertory of myth. The centaur, a subject already approached in the drawing *Centaur Contemplating a Cloud* (1863) and in *Centaur Aiming at a Cloud* (1875), as image of existential terror, is here a symbol of the struggle between good and evil.

◆ MADAME ARTHUR FONTAINE (1901)
The canvas, now in the Metropolitan Museum of New York, shows a woman intent on her embroidery. The clear luminous yellow of her dress emerges from the shade of an undefined garden scattered with purple flowers. The delicate veils of lace over her shoulders create remarkable transparent effects, while her delicately blurred face recalls Leonardo da Vinci's *sfumato.*

◆ EVE (1904)
The delicate tones of this pastel, now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, suggest the soft sensuality of a stupendous, mysterious Eve. Compared to Ingres's interpretation of the nude and his search for perfect form using line, Redon in his search for the spiritual subordinates line to color and substitutes *sfumato* for modeling.



◆ LARGE STAINED GLASS WINDOW (1904)
The painting, done in pastel and charcoal and currently in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, shows how the painter added to the majesty of his *Noirs* the enchantment of dazzling colors, like this cobalt blue, which wonderfully evoke the dark, mysterious luminousness and iridescent effects of Gothic windows. Another, similar *Large Stained Glass Window*, in shades of red, is in a French private collection.

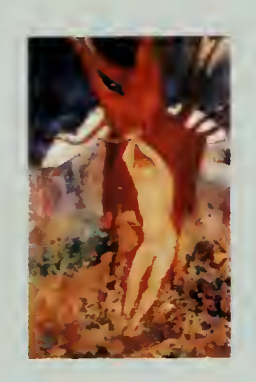


◆ ON THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA (1905)
Some fantastic visions appear in these years, like *Underwater Vision* and *Mysteries of the Sea*, evoking elementary forms of organic life through a style that in some way grows lighter, immaterial, freer, and with a purer light. Without ever completely achieving abstraction, this new way of painting allows Redon to develop unusual decorative forms.

◆ BUDDHA (1906)
His passion for Oriental philosophies, like that for science and literature, was transmitted to Redon by his friend Armand Clavaud. In these years the painter concentrated on religious themes, which allowed him to express his luminous style, like this pastel, where the sky above the hieratic figure of the Buddha appears transformed by the supreme radiation of the Master's spirit.

◆ VIOLETTE HEYMANN (1909)
"Painting is using a special sense, an innate sense for making a beautiful substance. It is like nature, creating the diamond, gold, sapphire, agate, precious metal, silk, flesh; it is a gift of delicious sensuality." The "beautiful substance" is achieved through the use of new expressive means like oils and pastels, which foster the birth of a language in which arabesque plays a crucial role.

◆ RUGGERO AND ANGELICA (1909-10)
In these works, where maidens are saved by heroes who vanquish monsters, the theme returns of the "beautiful passive victim, whose sexuality is intact, in contrast with the saving strength of the hero; this is perhaps the affirmation of the male over the female considered to be part of the natural order" (M.T. Benedetti). The symbolic significance could also refer to the role of the artist who draws beauty out of shapeless matter.



◆ ST SEBASTIAN (1910)
The martyred St Sebastian, a traditional figure of Christian iconography, uniting the religious theme with a reflection on death, repeatedly appears in Redon's work. The young saint, martyred by arrows, seems to rise again from the flowers at his feet. His ephebic beauty permits Redon to develop a comparison between the harmony of nature and the beauty of human forms.

◆ PANDORA (1910)
The painting, now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, shows Pandora wrapped in a rosy light and flowers, outlined by a thin contour line which makes her stand out against a tree in the background. Pandora is the first woman, created at Zeus's command, in the image of the immortal goddesses and destined to punish the human race, to whom Prometheus had just given fire.

◆ NIGHT (1910-11)
The large panel, painted in tempera, is part of the mural decoration of the library of the Cistercian abbey of Fontfroide in Langue d'Oc, which belonged to Gustav Foyet. The friend of men of letters and of artists, he invited Redon to restore the abbey with him. The artist seized the chance, as he was eager to try out his new vision of color and new techniques on large surfaces.

◆ DAY (1910-11)
The Mediterranean landscape of Fontfroide is more suited than the northern one to the luminous painting of Redon's mature years. The panel shows Apollo's chariot in the center, a recurrent theme in this period, standing out against the silhouette of a mountain. Apollo, symbol of the spirit's conquest of matter, becomes in Redon's work also a metaphor for artistic development and spiritual ascent.

◆ SILENCE (1911)
The work, of which Redon was so fond that he kept it on his desk, shows a human face with two fingers over its lips. In sign language this gesture refers to being mute, thus more than an exhortation to silence, as with the figure with one finger on its lips in the library at Fontfroide, it is a condition necessary for man to be able to hear his inner voice.

◆ THE BIRTH OF VENUS (1912)
Venus, the goddess of beauty, born from the sea, is the image of the procreative force of nature. Here she emerges from a shape like a shell, with evident sexual allusions. As opposed to Moreau's extremely seductive female creatures, Redon's female figures, like Pandora, Eve, Angelica, and Venus herself, are described with a highly simplified sinuous form.

◆ SHELL (1912)
The shell which served as a model for this painting was a favorite object of his son Arï. Redon isolates the image, enlarging it against an undefined ground; in this way, thanks also to the blurred quality of the colors and the chromatic chords, he transforms a motif painted from life into something at the same time evocative and symbolic (the image refers to the relationship between woman and nature).

# TO KNOW MORE

The following pages contain: some documents useful for understanding different aspects of Redon's life and work; the fundamental phases in the life of the artist; technical data and the location of the principal works found in this volume; an essential bibliography

## DOCUMENTS AND TESTIMONIES

### A student who was not understood

*Redon's experience at the Academy was frustrating to him. Unlike the more fortunate Bazille, Renoir, and Sisley, students of Gleyer, a mild-mannered man and respected teacher despite the difference in views, Redon felt suffocated in his studies by Gérôme, and some years later summarized the experience as follows:*

"At the Ecole des Beaux Arts I made every effort to render the forms... I went to the academy moved by the sincere wish to take my place in the wake of other painters, a student as they had been and ready for the approval and fair judgment of others. I had not taken into account the artistic formula which was to guide me, and I forgot about my own peculiar temperament. The professor tortured me. Whether he recognized the sincerity of my serious devotion to study, or saw me as a timid person willing to work, he visibly tried to force on me his way of seeing things and to make me a disciple, at the price of making me disgusted with art... He preached at me to close an outline, a form which I saw as palpitating. With the pretext of simplification (but why?), he had me close my eyes to the light and ignore the vision of the substance... His teaching was not suited to my nature. The professor misunderstood my natural gifts in the darkest, most complete way. He did not understand anything about me. I saw that his stubborn eyes were closed to what I saw with mine... I was there, young, sensitive, and undeniably of my own time, listening to I don't know what rhetoric that came who knows how from the works of a certain past... Impossible tie between us two, impossible union; submission which would have required sainthood from the student, which was not possible."

[O. Redon, *A soi même*, Paris, 1922]

### The Grammar of Images

*Redon replied to Huysmans's interpretation, still in some ways tied to his Realist influences, by counterpoising his own method, which denied the fortuitousness of his approach in the name of a strict formal logic.*

"It is nature which forces us to obey the gifts she has given us. My own gifts have pushed me toward dreams: I suffered the torments of my imagination and the surprises I got from it under my pencil; but I led and guided these surprises according to the laws of artistic organicism that I know, that I feel, with the sole purpose of obtaining in the viewer, by a sudden attraction, every evocation possible, albeit born of the uncertain, at the limits of thought... Contrary to Huysmans's insinuations, these images are not indebted in any way to that terrific world of the infinitely small revealed by microscopic analysis. Not at all. In creating them, I took the greatest care to organize their structure."

[O. Redon, *A soi même*, Paris, 1922]

### Delirium and illness

*The writer Huysmans, one of the first to recognize the talent and originality of Redon's art, produced long articles on him which, "although revealing more about the author than about Redon" (as Rewald observes), contributed to the painter's fame. The following passage is taken from Huysmans's novel.*

"Here was an enormous dice on which winked a sad eyelid, there dry, arid landscapes, calcified plains, earthquakes, eruptions, volcanoes which rose to hook clouds in revolt, stagnant, leaden skies; sometimes even the subjects seemed inspired by the nightmares of science, they seemed to go back to prehistoric times: monstrous flora bloomed on the rocks; erratic boulders everywhere, glacial mud, figures whose simian heads, thick jaws, jutting eyebrows, receding foreheads, flat crowns recalled the ancestral head, the first quaternary period head, the head of berry-eating, wordless man, the contemporary of the mammoth, split-nostrilled rhinoceros, and the great bear. Those drawings were beyond everything; for the most part they jumped beyond the bounds of paintings, inaugurating a very simple fantastic, a fantastic made of illness and delirium. In reality those faces devoured by immense eyes, the eyes of a madman, those outsized or deformed bodies as though viewed through a glass bottle called to des Esseintes mind memories of typhoid fever, memories still remaining from the burning nights, the frightening visions of his childhood."

[J.-K. Huysmans, *A rebours*, Paris, 1884]

### The repentant critic

*The writer and critic Octave Mirbeau, friend of Zola and admirer of the Impressionists, who in 1886 (while Redon was preparing to participate in the last Impressionist exhibition) had ferociously attacked the painter with a poisonous article, in 1890 wrote the artist a letter calling an end to the hostilities and confessing his admiration.*

"In the beginning I opposed, not your 'skill,' which I have always found of the best, but your concepts. Today there is no artist who thrills me as you do, because no one has opened to my spirit such distant, such luminous, such painful horizons onto the mystery, that is, onto the only true way... I am convinced, Sir – and I do not know what higher praise I could give you – I am convinced that I understood and loved you from the day when I suffered."

[Letter from O. Mirbeau to Redon in *Lettres à Odilon Redon*, Paris, 1960]

## HIS LIFE IN BRIEF

**1840.** Bertrand-Jean Redon, called Odilon, was born in Bordeaux, the second child of Bertrand Redon, originally from Libourne, who had made his fortune in Louisiana, and Marie-Odile Guérin, of a family of French colonists in New Orleans. Entrusted to his uncle's care, he spent his early childhood away from his parents on the family property of Peyrelebade, in the Médoc.

**1851.** The boy joined his family in Bordeaux, where he was enrolled in school.

**1855.** Studied drawing in Bordeaux under Stanislas Gorin.

**1857.** Under pressure from his father, studied architecture, but failed the oral examination for admission to the Académie des Beaux Arts in Paris.

**1859.** Traveled to Uhart in the Pyrennees with his friend Henry Berdoly.

**1863.** Devoted himself to sculpture in Bordeaux. Entered the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where he took courses taught by Léon Gérôme. From the preceding year, he had been drawing with charcoal. Met the botanist Armand Clavaud, who introduced him to contemporary literature and the natural sciences.

**1865.** Became friends with the engraver, Rodolphe Bresdin, who introduced him to etching and lithography.

**1868.** Spent part of the summer in Barbizon, where he met Corot.

**1870.** Participated as a soldier in the Franco-Prussian war and saw active duty in the fighting around the Loire. At the end of the war settled in Paris.

**1872.** Resided finally in Paris, spending summer at Peyrelebade. Frequented the literary and musical *salon* of Madame de Royssac.

**1874.** Odilon's father died. The family went through a period of financial difficulty.

**1875.** Painted in Barbizon in the spring and in July left for Brittany.

**1878.** Traveled through Belgium and Holland. Became enthusiastic about Rembrandt.

**1879.** Worked again in Brittany. Published his first album of lithographs, *Dans le rêve*.

**1880.** Married Camille Falte, a Creole woman from the island of Bourbon. In this period made his first pastels.

**1881.** His first show of charcoal drawings held in the editorial offices of the Paris weekly, *La Vie Moderne*.

**1883.** Published the album *Les origines*. Became close friends with the poet Stéphane Mallarmé.

**1884.** His brother Léo died. Redon exhibited at the first *Salon des Artistes Indépendants*, of which he was president; showed also in 1886 and 1887. In the meantime, Huysmans published his novel *A rebours*, in which he wrote of Redon's work.

**1886.** His first son, Jean, was born but died a few months later. Showed for the first time in the *Salon des XX* in Brussels and participated in the eighth and last Impressionist exhibition.

**1889.** His son Arï born. Participated in the first exhibition of painters and engravers at the Durand-Ruel gallery, where he would return every year until 1893.

**1890.** Exhibited for the second time at the *Salon des XX*. Met Mallarmé in Brussels. His friend Armand Clavaud committed suicide.

**1891.** Published the album *Les Songes*, in memory of Clavaud.

**1894.** Durand-Ruel organized a one-man show for him, followed by an exhibition in Holland, at the Arts Club of Le Hague. Wrote a letter, which later became famous, to his friend Edmond Picard. His palette became more colorful.

**1897.** The property at Peyrelebade, heavily mortgaged, was sold, as the artist could not pay them off.

**1898.** Exhibited at the Vollard gallery. Rented a villa at Saint-Georges de Didonne, near Royann, where he would spend summers.

**1900.** Participated in the Centennial of French Art as part of the Universal Exposition in Paris. Visited Italy. Finished the *Cyclops*.

**1904.** The *Salon d'Automne* dedicated a room to him with 62 works. The Musée de Luxemburg purchased *With Closed Eyes*.

**1908.** Visited Venice. Prepared the cartoons for the first Gebelins tapestries.

**1909.** Settled for the spring in Bièvres (Seine-et-Oise).

**1910.** Created the panels of *Day* and *Night* for the library of Fontfroide abbey; in London participated in the exhibition of the Post-Impressionists.

**1913.** Took part in the Kunsthaus exhibition in Zurich. Had a "Redon Room" with forty works at the *Armory Show*, an international exhibition of modern art in New York, Chicago, and Boston.

**1916.** The painter died on July 6 in Paris, and was buried in the cemetery of Bièvres.

## WHERE TO SEE REDON

*The following is a catalogue of the principal works by Redon conserved in public collections. The list of works follows the alphabetical order of the cities in which they are found. The data contain the following elements: title, dating, technique and support, size in centimeters, location.*

BALTIMORE (UNITED STATES)
**Vision,**
1881; charcoal, 41.9x36.6;
Baltimore Museum of Art.

BASEL (SWITZERLAND)
**St Sebastian,**
1910; oil on canvas, 92x59.5;
Kunstmuseum.

BELGRADE (YUGOSLAVIA)
**Egg,**
1885; charcoal, 45x34;
Narodni Muzej.

BORDEAUX (FRANCE)
**St Sebastian,**
c. 1908; oil on canvas, 52x67;
Musée des Beaux-Arts.

**View of Venice,**
n.d.; pastel, 69x52.5;
Musée des Beaux-Arts.

CHICAGO (UNITED STATES)
**Portrait of his Son Arï,**
1897; pastel on cardboard, 45.5x31.5;
Art Institute.

CLEVELAND (UNITED STATES)
**Violette Heymann,**
1909; pastel, 72x92.5;
Museum of Art.

FONTFROIDE (FRANCE)
**Day,**
1910-11; tempera, 200x650;
Library of Fontfroide abbey.

**Night,**
1910-11, tempera, 200x650;
Library of Fontfroide abbey.

HIROSHIMA (JAPAN)
**Pegasus,**
1900; pastel, 80.7x65;
Hiroshima Mueum of Art.

LONDON (GREAT BRITAIN)
**Golden Cell (Blue Profile),**
1892; oil, gold, and pastel on paper, 64x91;
British Museum.

**Ophelia Among the Flowers,**
n.d., pastel, 64x91; National Gallery.

NEW YORK (UNITED STATES)
**Silence,**
1911; oil on paper, 54.6x54;
Museum of Modern Art.

**The Eye-Balloon (L'Oeil-Ballon),**
1878; charcoal on paper, 42.5x33.5;
Museum of Modern Art.

**Ruggero and Angelica,**
c. 1910; pastel on paper mounted on canvas,
91.2x69.8; Museum of Modern Art.

**Vase with Flowers,**
c. 1914; pastel, 72.7x54;
Museum of Modern Art.

**Pandora,**
c. 1910; oil on panel, 143x62.2;
Metropolitan Museum of Art.

**Madame Arthur Fontaine,**
1901; oil on canvas, 72.4x57.2;
Metropolitan Museum of Art.

OTTERLO (HOLLAND)
**Cyclops,**
1895-1900; oil on panel, 64x51:
Kröller-Müller Museum.

**Pegasus and the Dragon,**
1909-10; oil on cardboard, 47x63;
Kröller-Müller Museum.

**Ruggero and Angelica,**
c. 1907; oil on canvas, 29x30;
Kröller-Müller Museum.

**Head of a Martyr,**
1877; charcoal, 37x36;
Kröller-Müller Museum.

OSAKA (JAPAN)
**Fantastic Figure (The Resurrection of Lazarus),**
n.d.; oil on canvas, 22.6x18.8;
Takahata Art Salon.

PARIS (FRANCE)
**Buddha,**
1906; oil on canvas, 61x46;
Musée d'Orsay.

**Chariot of Apollo,**
1905-14; oil and pastels on canvas,
91.5x77; Musée d'Orsay.

**Shell,**
1912; pastel, 51x58;
Musée d'Orsay.

**Oriental Woman,**
1895-1900; pastel, 65.5x53.8;
Musée d'Orsay.

**Eve,**
1904; oil on canvas, 61x46; Musée d'Orsay.

**Joan of Arc,**
c. 1900; pastel, 52x27.5; Musée d'Orsay.

**Large Stained Glass Window,**
c. 1904; pastel and charcoal, 87x68;
Musée d'Orsay.

**With Closed Eyes,**
1890; oil on canvas mounted on
cardboard, 44x36; Musée d'Orsay.

**Landscape at Peyrelebade,**
1880; oil on canvas, 46.8x45.4;
Musée d'Orsay.

**Madame Redon,**
1882; oil on canvas, 45.5x37;
Musée d'Orsay.

**The Birth of Venus,**
1912; pastel, 84.4x65;
Musée du Petit Palais.

**Self-Portrait,**
c. 1898; black pencil, 14x17.9; Louvre.

**Shell,**
1912; pastel, 52x57.8; Louvre.

PHILADELPHIA (UNITED STATES)
**Eve (Nude with Blue Scarf),**
n.d., pastel, 44x37;
Philadelphia Museum of Art.

TOKIO (JAPAN)
**With Closed Eyes,**
c. 1894; oil on panel, 45.5x36.5;
Fujikawa Museum.

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For further study of Redon's artistic development, it is advisable to consult the general catalogues of his work.


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G. Briganti, *Pittura fantastica e visionaria dell'Ottocento*, Milan

**1978** G. Berardelli, *Simbolismo francese, storia di un concetto*, Milan

**1985** M. Volpi Orlandini, *Artisti contemporanei. Saggi*, Rome

**1987** E. Coen, *Dopo Arcimboldi: metamorfosi della psiche nell'arte moderna*, in *Arcimboldi e l'arte delle meraviglie*, in *Art Dossier*, Florence

**1988** J. Villa, *La vie et l'oeuvre de Odilon Redon*, Courbevoie

**1994-95** *Odilon Redon, Prince of Dreams 1840-1916*, exh. cat., Chicago-Amsterdam-London

**1995** M. Gibson, *Odilon Redon*, Cologne

**1997** M.T. Benedetti, *Il Simbolismo*, in *Art Dossier*, Florence

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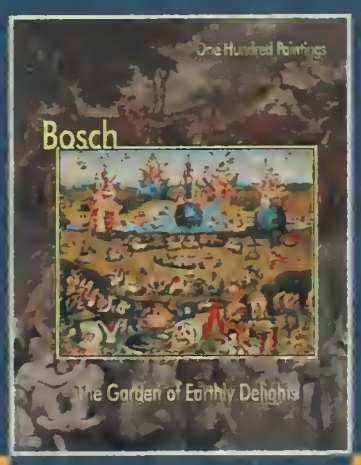

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